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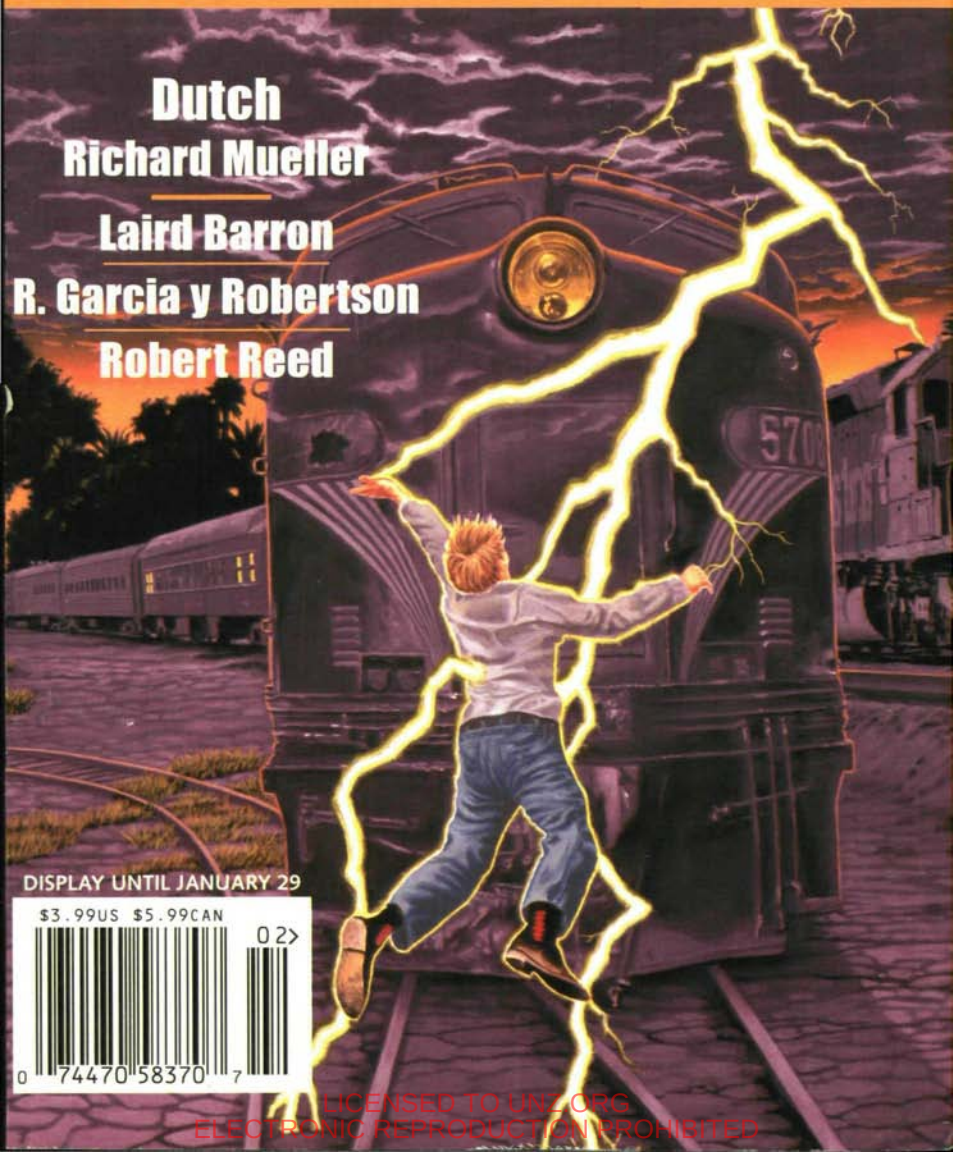

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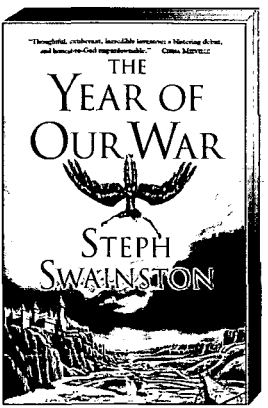

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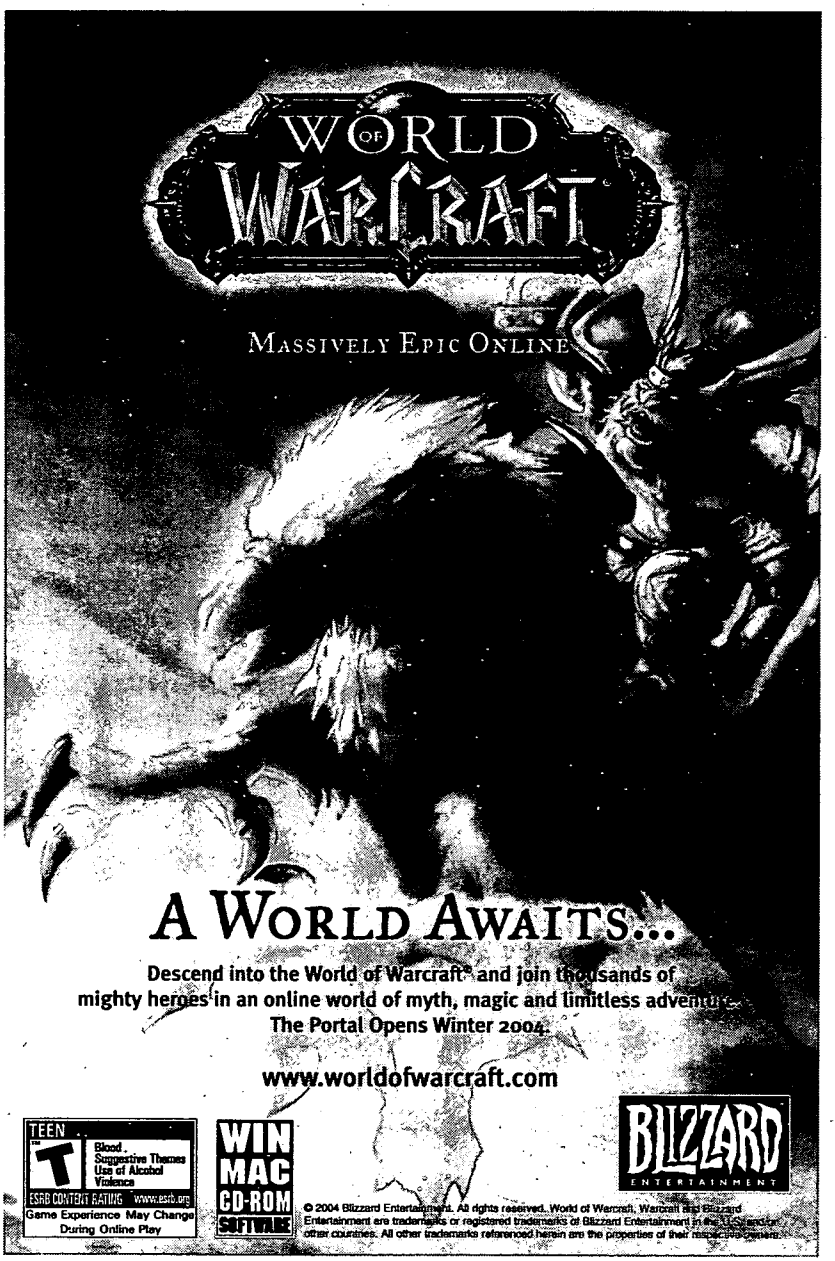
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Just recently, subscriber K. J. J. from Seattle wrote to say: "You promise in the prelude of 'A Little Learning' to bring the readership more stories of the noösphere, and I certainly hope that just wasn't to get me to renew my subscription!" Would we lie! In a pig's eye!

While we have several new stories by Mr. Hughes in inventory, none of them concern Guth Bandar, but fret not, noösphere fans! Guth Bandar makes an appearance in Mr. Hughes's third novel, Black Brillion, *a copy of which arrived just as we were preparing this issue for press.*

Inner Huff

By Matthew Hughes

BY COVERING HIS EARS tightly with his palms, Guth Bandar was able to listen to the songs of the Loreleis in various Situations without becoming entranced. That was good, because to be captivated by the heart-tearing beauty of the voices would mean being trapped forever in one of the myriad byways of the collective unconscious — the Commons, as it was called by the fellows of the Institute for Historical Inquiry, of which Bandar had become an adjunct scholar.

Today he was collecting his seventh siren song, this one from a little visited Location where the singers were concealed behind a prototypical waterfall. The water sprang from a crevice in a cliff that soared above a darkly silent forest of ancient hardwoods. It fell as a sun-sparkled curtain into a limpid pool where a rainbow perpetually shimmered over the splash of foam. The song of the unseen Loreleis interwove seamlessly with the sound of the water. The combination of natural and magic sounds was a unique iteration of the siren motif and Bandar was determined to capture and reproduce the effect.

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He had entered the Location a short distance away, arriving through a node that delivered him to the foot of a spreading chestnut tree. Upon arrival he had immediately sung the appropriate sequence of tones that insulated him from the perceptions of any of the Location's inhabitants.

The most likely idiomatic entity inhabiting this corner of the Commons, apart from the Loreleis, would have been a tragic Hero drawn to his doom by the siren song, perhaps companioned by a hapless Helper or a Faithful Beast. Bandar had searched the immediate forest but found none such. Their absence argued for his having arrived at a point in the Situation's cycle where the song-ensorceled entities had already been drawn into the pool and romantically drowned.

He ceased intoning the insulating thran and immediately the mingled sounds of cataract and female singers came drifting through the trees. At this distance the song was indistinct but its appeal was strong; before he knew it, he had already taken an involuntary step toward its source and was even now taking a second.

Bandar clapped hands over ears and the sound was shut out. His uplifted foot, about to complete the next step, paused in mid-stride. He stood still. Slowly, in the tiniest of increments, he eased the pressure of his palms against his ears. The faintest sound came to him and he experienced only a slight inclination to move toward it.

He took a step, knowingly this time, then made sure to stop before further lightening the pressure of his hands. The sound of the waterfall was more clear-cut, the female voices woven through its splash and chuckle. Bandar took two steps sideways. Now a substantial beech stood between him and the deadly glade. He leaned his head against the cool, smooth bark and eased his palms away from his ears.

The song insinuated itself, like a delicious itch, into his mind. Using an Institute technique, he fragmented his consciousness, letting part of him absorb the sound while another element of his awareness recited a sequence of syllables. The effect was to distance himself from the part of him that was aching to lift his forehead from the tree and race ecstatically toward the deadly pool.

The song's cycle was no more than three minutes long. Then the voices paused for a few heartbeats and began anew. Rigorously concentrating on the syllabic chant, Bandar let the recording function of his mind

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gather and hold the melody. He was careful not to compare it to the other six Lorelei songs he had already collected. It would not do to contaminate the sample.

After the second hearing he believed he had it. He broke off the syllabic sequence and again intoned the thran. Chanting, he turned and went farther into the forest. At a safe distance he called into existence the great globular map of the Commons that was the prize and glory of his memory. He consulted its intricate web of colored lines and points of intersection, then went a certain distance to his left.

Now Bandar sang a new collection of notes, three short rising tones followed by a long descender. A ripple appeared in the air before him and resolved itself into a vertical slit. He stepped through and emerged onto a stony beach set between the waves of a wine dark sea and a grove of ancient olive trees. Nearby was a clearing overgrown with wild grapes and berries.

He had scouted this Location a few days before and deduced that it was yet another version of the Desert Island. Remote and unpopulated earthly paradises were paradoxically popular in the Commons, bespeaking humankind's perennial desire to get away from one's fellows and the myriad demands of society.

A quiet place to sit and think was one of the island's attractions; the other was that it was but one node away from the eighth and final Lorelei Location, a rocky islet surrounded by crashing breakers. Again, drowning was the archetypical fate of those who fell beneath the singers' spell, but this one took its victims by the boatload.

Bandar went up the beach and into the grove, chanting a thran to hide himself from any idiomats; even a desert island might have an occupant, perhaps a visiting cannibal whose presence represented some archetypical fear of the Other. He poked about in the greenery but saw no traces of habitation, just a few goats and some pigs snuffling for fallen fruit beneath the olive trees.

He went back down the beach and sat on a flat rock, dabbling his feet in the cool water. He ceased chanting the thran and took up the exercise of the syllables again so that he could replay the waterfall song in his mind. Even with the prevention technique, there was a moment or two when he might have lost the necessary distance from the song's insistent beauty.

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But a fear of sitting enraptured in this spot, endlessly hearing the song until he was absorbed into the Location, helped him to remain unaffected.

He listened with critical attention and was pleased with what he heard. The seventh song in his collection was essentially the same as the other six, lending strong support to his thesis that the melody was itself an archetype: humanity's Song of songs from which all other airs and rhapsodies sprang.

If the eighth and final iteration of the Lorelei motif was the same as the other seven, Bandar would prepare a paper for presentation at the Institute's annual Great Colloquium, to be held a few days hence. He would argue, he believed convincingly, for the Song being recognized as a new archetype, the first to have been identified in millennia.

There would be opposition, of course, and it would be led by Underfellow Didrick Gabbris, Bandar's lifelong academic rival. Gabbris would cite the unchallenged truism of Old Earth's penultimate age that everything that could ever have been discovered had by now been found, identified, discussed with full annotation, and for the most part forgotten. But not the Song of songs, Bandar knew. He had researched the matter thoroughly. He believed he was about to add something new and — he relished the pun — *unheard of* to the annals of the Institute.

Gabbris would grind his teeth in helpless rage. Bandar took a moment to envision the event. He enjoyed the images so much that he let them appear on the screen of his consciousness a second time, with minor embellishments.

A tiny sound interrupted his reverie, the *click* of stone against stone. Bandar rose from the rock on which he was seated and turned. A naked woman, lithe and small breasted, with raven hair and emerald eyes, had crept down the beach toward him. Her vulpine features were set in an expression of profound mischief and her hand held an olive wood staff. She was about to touch his shoulder with the carved head of a satyr that adorned the rod's tip.

Bandar could not step out of her reach; the flat rock pressed against the backs of his thighs. He opened his mouth to intone the four-and-two thran but before he could complete its opening tetrad the dark wood touched him.

His first impression was that she was somehow increasing in size,

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looming over him so that he found himself looking up at her from about the level of her thighs. He felt a growing strain in his neck. He was having to bend it back so that he might continue gazing at her face. That was, he realized, because he had sunk onto all fours. At the same time he noticed that the odors of which he had been only moderately aware — the faint smell of the sea, the stink of dried seaweed up the beach, the mustiness under the olive trees, the spice of the Nymph's flesh — had all grown both richer and sharper.

To ease the strain in his neck he lowered his head and regarded his hands. But they were no longer hands. Their digits had drawn together into two clumps, the nails expanding and darkening. *Hooves*, he thought, *and a pig's hooves at that.*

He heard a giggle from above him, the sound of a malicious girl relishing a prank. Then he felt a sharp pain in his buttocks. She had whacked him across the hams with her staff. He started forward, up toward the olive trees, and was encouraged to hurry when a second blow landed in the same region as the first.

"Hurry, pig," said a voice both melodious and cruel. "Funny, tasty pig."

A third swat followed. Bandar squealed and scuttled for the trees.

THE NOÖSPHERE, as the collective unconscious was more properly called by the Institute's scholars, lay hidden in the lower reaches of every human psyche. It was a labyrinth of interconnected Landscapes, Events, and Situations, the cores of every myth, legend, fiction, and joke. Its inhabitants were the archetypical figures that furnished the dreams of humanity — Wise Man and Fool, Hero and Destroyer, Maiden, Mother and Crone, Temptress and Comforter, and a host of others.

An archetype commonly encountered was the Enchantress, realized in a multitude of motifs: the maleficent Wood Witch who magicked errant hunters into wolf-slaves; the Faery Princess who beguiled a lovestruck swain through an afternoon that became a decade; the teasing Coquette whose charms figuratively turned men into animals; and the island-bound Nymph whose spells went the whole hog.

A noönaut like Guth Bandar ought to have been sequestered from her

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powers by a thran, a specific series of notes — like the protective song of the Singer who visited Hell in the dawn time myth — that removed him from this Enchantress's purview. But thrans had to be sung continuously, not set aside while the noönaut relished an imagined triumph over a rival.

Now, as the Nymph drove him toward the rest of her herd of swine, Bandar endeavored to chant the four-and-two. His corporeal body, seated in his meditation chamber at the Institute, waiting for his consciousness to reanimate it, enjoyed perfect pitch; that ability transposed to his consciousness whenever it went sojourning through the Commons. When that consciousness was transformed into a pig, however, Bandar found that a porcine vocal apparatus could not strike the proper notes. His overlarge ears, flopping against his fatted cheeks, told him that he was producing unmusical skreeks and skrawks. These had no effect on his captor other than to provoke yet another blow from the staff and an admonition to "Keep silence, piggy, else I'll not wait for your fattening. I'll smoke your belly and boil your head tomorrow."

He was driven into the olive grove. To his new nose, the place was awash with the smells of mulch and overripe fruit crushed underfoot, overlaid by the rank reek of the goats and the now curiously appealing scent of the other swine. The Nymph drove him into their midst and they made way for him with squeals and grunts, regarding him with sad and knowing gazes. Their attention was soon diverted, however, when their owner struck the trees with her staff and shook the branches, causing a heavy rain of olives. The swine fell upon the fruit with snuffles of appetite.

One heavily larded specimen ignored the feed. A piebald boar, he showed not appetite but stark terror as the Nymph favored him with a weighing look. She poked a finger into the fat overlying his ribs and gave a grunt that bespoke a decision reached. She goaded the hog with the foot of her staff and chased him toward a trail that led from the grove deeper into the island's center. The chosen one gave a shrill cry that, even though a pig's throat formed it, carried an unmistakably human note of fearful despair.

Bandar fought against panic. He also had to exert himself to overcome a growing interest in the ripe olives that littered the grove. He felt an urge to shoulder aside the other swine to get at the choicest morsels. These inclinations only deepened his fear.

A consciousness that stayed too long in any Commons Location was

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at risk of being absorbed. Even the insulating thrans could not keep the power of the place from overpowering the sojourner and fitting him into the matrix of an Event or Situation. The discovery and mapping of the noösphere over the course of millennia had seen countless explorers inextricably engrossed into Locations. Their consciousnesses had devolved into the semi-awareness of idiomatic entities, or died outright when their virtual flesh had been transfixed by a phalanx's spears or immolated by a dragon's breath.

Being transformed into a swine worked against Guth Bandar. It threatened to weaken the integrity of his sojourning self. He must leave this Location soon or risk losing his sense of identity. If he forgot who he was he would truly become a transmogrified pig, fattening on olives, until his turn came to encounter the knife and the rendering tub.

He tore his attention away from the delicious olives he had been munching while he contemplated his fate. He found he was even more drawn toward a young sow who was giving off an odor that grew more maddeningly compelling the closer she came. A big boar with well developed tusks was shadowing her. Bandar wondered how large his own tusks might be and felt a growing urge to paw the ground and voice a guttural challenge.

Concentrate, he told himself. *And get clear of that sow while you're still more man than pig.* He made a great effort and turned his head away from her delightful scent, then deliberately followed his nose toward less freighted air. He found the path down which the Nymph had herded her victim and followed it. *No pig would willingly take this course*, he told himself, and felt better for it.

The path led him uphill through woods for a short while, then leveled off in a long, broad meadow of short grass grazed by sheep. Bandar wondered if all the four-legged inhabitants of the island had been transformed from human idiomats and if the kind of animals they became were determined by the Enchantress's whims or by their own natures. He couldn't account for anything in his own makeup that would qualify him for pigdom, unless it was his penchant for rooting about in academic puzzles and turning up exquisite little truffles like the Lorelei song. These were decidedly unpiglike musings, a thought that encouraged him further.

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He was finding that four limbs and strong hooves made for rapid locomotion. He was almost across the meadow now, following a path of beaten earth. Ahead was a stand of stately trees. Between the boles and branches he could make out an imposing building faced in marble, ornamented with columns and pilasters and set about with statuary. As he neared the trees he veered off the path and approached by a roundabout route. He came upon a garden with a pool and fountain, beyond which a paved walkway sloped down to a grotto.

He followed it, his hooves clicking softly on the stones. It led him to a sunken lawn, shaded by a rocky outcrop beneath which a bower of fragrant grasses had been heaped up and covered with carpets of soft wool. On this reclined a stocky man of middle years, red of hair and beard, who idly contemplated the gold beaker in his hand before he raised it to his lips. A driblet of purple wine ran from the corner of his mouth to lose itself in his beard, but he paid it no heed, his bright blue eyes gazing at nothing.

A beguiled Hero, Guth Bandar thought. He regarded the idiomat closely, saw neither great thews nor features so striking as to indicate divine parentage, although there were scars on the man's arms and naked chest. *A very old type,* he concluded, *a swordster when necessary, yet more inclined to the craftiness of a trickster.*

Bandar was pressing his mind to remember what he'd learned of this variant of the Hero archetype. There might be some way to play upon its known characteristics to create a strategy that would lead to his being reconstituted as a human being. After which, he would forthwith intone a thran to shield him from the view of Hero and Nymph long enough to put some distance between him and them. A quick chant of a particular seven-tone sequence would open an emergency gate. He would leap through and return to his inert body in the meditation room.

In a crisis — if, for example, the Nymph came for him with the knife — he might try to conjure the gate while still in pig form. The risk would be that he might arrive back in his body to find that parts of his psyche were still more swine than human. There were already too many people like that on Old Earth — Didrick Gabbris merely the first that came to mind.

A voice broke into his thoughts and he realized that the figure on the bower was speaking to him. "I said, 'What are you looking at, pig?'" Now

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the idiomat shrugged and drank more wine. "Though even a pig might look at a king."

Bandar contrived as intelligent a face as his porcine features would allow. "Hmmm?" he said, and though the arrangement of his huge nasal cavity gave the wordless sound a certain honk, he thought it sounded reasonably human for a pig.

"I have pigs of my own," the Hero said. "I'm king of an island, you know."

Bandar made the same sound, but altered the tone so that it sounded like, "Really?"

"Yes," said the idiomat, "but you know I'd be happy just to be a swineherd if I could see once more my wife and son."

"Hmmm," said Bandar, with a nod and a note of sympathy.

"I really must do something about getting home," the Hero said. "Build another ship or something."

This time Bandar's "Hmmm," offered encouragement, a spur to action.

There ensued a conversation, largely one-sided, in which the Hero King issued observations and Bandar replied with combinations of nods, wags, and hums. The noönaut was surprised how much information could be exchanged even when one interlocutor's vocabulary could not rise above the barest minimum.

"You are decidedly insightful for a pig," said the Hero. "Indeed, I have known princes who could learn from you." He drank the lees of his cup and reached for a gold pitcher that stood on a nearby table. "If they weren't too busy sulking in their tents or stealing concubines."

The idiomat poured more wine and hefted the goblet, then paused with it halfway to his stained lips. "I like a good palaver," he said. "It seems to me I have not had a conversation of any depth since..." He appeared to be consulting a mental timeline that would not hold its shape. "Since a long time," he finished.

"Hmmm," said Bandar. Engaging in conversation, even under his present disadvantages, was helping to keep pigness at a distance. He was wondering how he could turn this encounter further to his profit. Perhaps the Hero could persuade the Nymph to undo the spell. Focusing on the matter with a pig's brain was not easy, however. He missed the Hero's next question.

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Fortunately the idiomat seemed to be accustomed to repeating himself. "I said, 'It seems to me I arrived here with several companions.' You haven't seen any of them, have you?"

An agonized squeal from not far off claimed their attention. Moments later, the Nymph came tripping down the walkway, carrying a gold plate on which lay two fair-sized morsels of raw flesh. She went to where a brazier stood on a tripod and poked at its coals with a knife, blowing them into a glowing heat. Bandar backed into the undergrowth while she was laying the plate on the embers. His sharp ears heard a faint sizzle while his pig's nose caught a whiff of cooking meat. It smelled delicious.

"I've brought you a little treat, my dear," the Nymph said, over her shoulder. "Something to restore your vigor."

Bandar realized what the two frying objects were and where they had come from. Not far away must be a most despondent boar. He also had no doubt as to the fate of the king's erstwhile shipmates. He could not repress a gasp and a shudder.

Unfortunately, a gasping, shuddering pig could not fail to attract a Nymph's attention. She turned to regard him. The brows knitted above her sharp nose and the green eyes flashed, then narrowed. Bandar was reminded that idiomats, even the Principals of Locations, tended toward simplicity. They were not real people, only rudimentary personas — much like the characters in myth and fiction to which they had given rise. Where people would pause and consider, idiomats invariably acted.

"Have you met this remarkable pig?" the king was saying, even as his consort crossed the lawn, knife in hand and unmistakable motivation in her face. Bandar turned and fled.

He had been a healthy young man in his virtual self, therefore he was a healthy young pig. He soon discovered how to go from a rapid trot to a fast gallop, although he wasn't entirely sure that pigs were built for the latter gait. He did not stop to ponder the question, however; he made his best speed with the sound of thudding Nymph footsteps closing on his tail. And on what flopped below them.

He ran up a slope, breaking through a shrubbery of artfully trimmed bushes, then onto another open meadow — this one with donkeys. They scattered as he burst through their midst, heading for a thick growth of

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trees that climbed toward what looked to be either a high hill or a low mountain at the island's center.

His pursuer's footsteps grew louder. He put on more speed but soon he heard her drawing near again. And now it became apparent that pig lungs and legs were designed more for the sprint than the marathon, whereas Nymphs were apparently tireless.

He could hear not only her footfalls but her breathing as he reached the trees and raced between the boles. Not far in he found thickets of thorn and bramble and into these he plunged without slowing. The sharp protrusions tore at his hide, but pig skin was thick and the scratches caused him far less discomfort than he would have experienced as a man. His long, low, and relatively streamlined shape was also ideal for snaking through brush at good speed.

He soon left the Nymph behind. He could hear her cursing him, her voice receding as he went deeper into the woods. Fortunately, it seemed that her maledictions were not effective unless she was wielding the olive staff.

Bandar ran a little farther into the greenery, then stopped in a small open space roofed over with prickly vines. He elevated his ear flaps and moved his head from side to side, but heard nothing to alarm him. He let his wide nostrils sample the air and scented no immediate danger.

He bent his forelimbs, then let his hindquarters settle to the forest floor. He had to think. There was no point in seeking to enlist the Hero King's aid. The red-haired idiomat was the Enchantress's prize — her control of him was almost certainly what this Situation was all about. She would guard him closely.

Nor could Bandar hide out on the island and attempt to reshape his virtual flesh. For one thing, the technique required leisure to concentrate; he doubted the Nymph would afford him such. For another, the only time he had attempted the procedure he had distorted himself in freakish ways. Getting from swinehood to humanness was almost certainly beyond him.

Bandar's best recourse was to find a gate and pass through to somewhere less lethal. Then he might plot a course through to some Location where the Principal was a wielder of benign magic who would lift the Nymph's curse and restore the noönaut to his true proportions. There were relatively few such places and personas — the Commons dealt out more horror than happy fun times — but they were there to be found.

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And Guth Bandar had the means to find them. He concentrated and summoned the map of the noösphere into virtual existence. He found it difficult to see deeply into the complex webwork of points and lines — his pig's eyes were not so placed as to enable stereoscopic vision of near objects. Finally, he cocked his head to bring one eye to bear and began to plot a route to salvation.

He found that there were two nodes on the island that connected the Nymph's Location to others. One was a single-direction gate that would take him into a nightmarish cityscape, an urban dystopia rife with crime and infamy where the only semblance of order was a brotherhood of bounty hunters. It was no place for an innocent pig; those who might not see him as food on the hoof would likely use him for target practice.

The other gate was a multi-destination node: depending on the sequence of tones employed by an approaching noönaut, it might open to any of five places. One was a mellow kingdom of strolling troubadours and itinerant tale-spinners. Better yet, a short jog across that Location would bring him to a gate into a children's Situation — luckily, not one of the many nasty ones, but a winter fantasia whose magical, merry Principal enjoyed bestowing gifts and bonbons on good little boys and girls. He would surely grant the wish of a good little pig.

The multifarious node waited in the meadow of the donkeys. That was a dangerously wide space to cross, especially if an angry Enchantress lurked nearby. It might take pig-Bandar more than one trial to find the right notes to activate the exit.

But he resolved to hazard the meadow, though he would wait for nightfall. In the meantime, he would practice producing tones from a pig's throat.

THE MOON RODE full and high across a dark blue heaven, flooding the field with silvery light. Bandar stood beneath the last of the trees and surveyed the open space. Pig night vision was no better than the human version, but his ears and nose added a wealth of sensory impressions. The meadow's inhabitants stood clumped not far away, making donkey murmurs to each other. Of the Nymph there was no sign.

Bandar crept out onto the cropped grass, advanced a few steps and

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paused. He heard nothing. He felt the slight tingle in the back of his mind that told him he was near to a node and went in the direction that made the sensation increase. A few more steps and again he paused, again hearing and seeing nothing.

The gate was not too far now. He trotted forward, mentally rehearsing the sequence of tones he must sing to activate it.

Midway across the meadow, he heard a rustle of motion among the donkeys. He turned to look their way. A slim figure rose from amongst them. It was the Nymph and in her hand was the olive wood staff.

Swiftly she laid its leering tip to the backs of the donkeys. With each contact the touched beast changed shape, became longer and lower. Their excited braying became a baying, the deep bell of a hunting pack underlaid by slavering growls.

She touched the last of the herd then pointed with the staff. "After him!" she cried. "Rend him!"

Bandar had not waited for the transformations to be completed. He burst toward the place where the right combination of sounds would call up safety from empty air. But the pack moved faster than even a well-motivated pig. They swept across the meadow toward him.

He could feel the nearness of the node and he did not break stride before chanting the tones that should open it.

Nothing happened. He realized that running and chanting at the same time, especially with his less-than-expert control of porcine vocal equipment, were affecting his pitch and intonation.

He skidded to a halt before the spot where a ripple should be wavering in the moonlight. The air was undisturbed.

The pack came on. He could see them, long ears and dark muzzles, black lips drawn back from foam-flecked fangs. The collective sound they made, of appetite and blood lust, sent a shiver through Bandar's meat.

He took a short settling breath and sang the tones again. The beasts were almost on him. The lead hound gathered its hindquarters beneath it and sprang, stretching its lean body through an arc that would bring its jaws to Bandar's soft throat.

The ripple appeared. Bandar jumped. He heard the click of canine teeth closing on empty air. Then he was through.

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The Commons was the original fount of all myth and legend. Explored over tens of thousands of years, all of its terrors and wonders were long since identified and cataloged. Yet among undergraduates of the Institute, the noösphere had paradoxically become the subject of a myth of its own. Though senior fellows and tenured scholars derided the notion, students whispered to each other that they sometimes felt that humanity's collective unconscious was somehow *aware* of their presence — and worse, that their traipsing through Events and Situations was resented.

How else to explain the ill luck that too frequently accompanied sojourns among the idiomatic entities? It was understandable that the early explorers, groping their way from one uncharted Location to another, might fall afoul of an anthropophagic giant or a murderous worm. But with the Commons now as well mapped as any place in the waking world of Old Earth, why should noönauts so often blunder into lethal traps and snares? Why must the noösphere be so unforgiving?

As a youth, Bandar had shivered at the speculations of his classmates. In his maturity, his views were aligned with the establishment's. Only the day before this exploration, overhearing a callow underclassman named Chundlemars regaling his friends with some apocryphal tale of a sentient Commons, Bandar had spoken sharply.

"The Commons is an aggregate of contending forces. Disunity is its most salient characteristic. Fool contends against Wise Man, Hero confronts Villain, Anima opposes Animus. How can these contentious fragments unite behind a single program?"

Chundlemars had had the temerity to dispute the issue. "Yet a mob, however disparate its members' views on a host of issues, can cooperate to attack an inimical outsider."

Bandar bridled. "The key word in 'collective unconscious' is 'unconscious,' not 'collective,'" he said. "To become aware of intruders, the unconscious must first become self-aware. Self-awareness is by definition consciousness. Therefore it is a logical impossibility for the unconscious to become conscious."

The student had bent before Bandar's tirade but had still shown fight. "Perhaps not impossible, but merely difficult," he had said, "hence its efforts to capture our attention are diffuse and seem inconclusive."

Bandar had disdained to continue the argument and with a brusque

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gesture had sent the youths hustling off to another corner of the Institute's grounds.

But now as Bandar gazed at the view that had appeared before him the moment he had come through the gate and onto this grassy hill, a frisson of fear caused the skin of his back to twitch. If this Location was the sunny realm of bards and troubadours that he had sought, he ought to be able to see at least one towered and turreted castle, its conical roofs aflutter with gay pennants and gonfalons. There ought to be a fountain or two on verdant lawns and gentle woods with trees as round and symmetrical as a child's drawing.

Instead the noönaut saw a tangled forest broken only by a narrow, unpaved track that wound its way past scattered clearings in which rude dwellings stood next to vegetable gardens. Farther off stood a sturdier edifice of red brick with a slate roof and a chimney from which gray smoke idled.

But nowhere to be seen were shaded bowers or romantic ruins. Bandar listened but heard no lutes or dulcimers, only the cawing of two ragged birds. His pig's nose brought him not the scent of flowers and fruited trees but a faint odor of carrion.

Not good, he thought. He brought the map into existence again. He examined the symbolic representation of the node through which he had arrived and saw that it was even more multifarious than he had realized. The gate was identified by a yellow heptagon within a green circle, signifying that it led to seven destinations if sung to in one key, and yet another seven outcomes if the thran was dropped a full tone.

Yet Bandar had been sure the map had shown him a green pentagon in a yellow circle. He had carefully traced the outcomes. He should be in the land of song and story, on his way to the children's winter paradise. Instead, as he studied the map, he was not quite sure where he had landed. He tried to focus on the symbols identifying this present Location, but the characters' lines kept wavering and blurring, as if seen through an intervening mist.

His impression, however, was that he was in one of the most obscure sites, a subsidiary of a tributary two steps removed from a minor whorl. That meant that there might be few gates out of this Location, perhaps even only one, and he would have no choice but to take it.

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How had he misread the map? Accidents were always possible, but Bandar had planned his route with meticulous care. The adolescent fear of being surrounded by a malicious, resentful Commons crept out of the closet. Bandar resolutely thrust it back and mentally slammed the door. Perhaps his pig eyes did not resolve certain colors or shapes as well as his human orbs could. He would be more careful next time.

He raised the flaps of his ears and turned in a slow circle on the hilltop. Beyond the squawking of the birds he heard the sound of voices raised in argument. They were coming from a clearing some small way off.

The voices offered Bandar a means of discovering where he was. He would approach stealthily and observe and identify the idiomats, deducing from their characteristics the Situation or Event in which he had landed. Then he would find its precise position on the map and from there plot a route to safety.

The forest, when he entered it, was of the Sincere/Approximate classification: what the Institute called "forest-like" rather than a truly realistic mix of trees, underbrush, and detritus. Its iconic characteristics told Bandar that he was almost certainly in a Class Four Situation: likely an archetypical joke or one of the lighter tales for children, possibly one so ancient that it had been superseded eons ago by new formulations. But nothing was ever lost in the Commons. Just as Bandar's essential gene plasm carried all the instructions necessary to build precursor species that had gone extinct a billion years before, so the collective unconscious preserved every Form and Type that the human brain had ever conceived.

Still, there were advantages to being stranded in a Class Four Situation: physical surroundings would count for little; the Situation's cycle would involve only indispensable interactions between the idiomatic inhabitants.

That would pose no difficulties if the situation revolved around, say, a sexual encounter between a lusty farmer's wife and a hired hand. The idiomats would be so intent upon each other that a pig would pass unnoticed. But if he was traversing a tale about a bridge-haunting troll that devoured talking livestock, Bandar might suddenly find himself added to the menu. He therefore made a light-hooved approach to the sound of voices.

He was hearing an argument; that much was clear from the tone even

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before he could make out the words. That it was a good-natured dispute, carried on without rancor, was a good sign: the disputants were unlikely to have weapons in their hands. Bandar stole closer, weaving stealthily through the generic underbrush. The arguers called each other "Brother," and seemed to be contradicting each other over the merits of construction methodologies — a pair of artisan monks was Bandar's first thought.

He eased his way through some cartoonishly rendered bushes, finding that his sharp hooves made no noise on the forest floor. The voices were quite clear now, the argument definitely about the strength of a wall. Apparently winds were a factor here, since one of the disputants was contending that the wall before them would collapse at the first breath. The other replied that its interwoven construction gave the barrier a resilient tensile strength, adding, "The willow bends where the oak falls."

Bandar moved closer. There were fewer leaves between him and the argument now. He could make out something blue. He pressed a little farther forward and saw that it was coarse cloth with yellow stitching, the leg of a utilitarian garment such as a workman or farmer might wear. He inched toward the leg and saw that it ended in a scuffed leather boot.

Not so bad, he thought. He was in some Wisdom Story, perhaps a minor variant of the Flexibility versus Rigidity dichotomy. Its idiomats would be exclusively focused on their debate and soon would come a great wind to test one theory over another. Bandar was not worried about the wind; by the time it came, he would have traversed what must surely be a very small Location, found an exit gate, and be on his way.

He backed away from the arguing idiomats. But as he did so he found that his pig's ears were better designed for pressing forward through underbrush, even of the generic sort, than for rearward motion. One of his flaps caught on a twig, which scraped over the protruding cartilage before snapping free. Above Bandar's head one branch slapped against another and the bush trembled, swishing its broad and simple leaves against each other.

"What was that?" said the champion of flexible walls.

"It came from down there," said the advocate for solid masonry.

The first voice dropped to a whisper. "Is it You Know Who?"

The branches above Bandar's head were swept away by a stout walking stick and he heard the second voice take on a tone of horror and disgust as it said, "No, it's some kind of ugly monster!"

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"Oh, it's hideous!" cried the other.

Now all Bandar wanted was to back out of the bush, turn, and run. But he could not help looking up toward the voices. He saw above him, their features contorted in horror, the faces of two anthropomorphically rendered pigs.

"Kill it!" said Flexibility with an idiomat's typical decisiveness, and Rigidity raised his heavy cane to put his brother's advice into action. Bandar squealed and tore himself loose from the bushes, but now the two pig-men were crashing through the undergrowth after him and showing that in addition to their murderous impulses their humanly formed legs and feet could sustain a considerable speed.

Bandar deked and jinked, circling tree trunks and leaping over fallen logs. The brothers pounded after him and soon displayed a dismaying intelligence: they spread out, one seeking to cut Bandar off and drive him toward the other. Both, he saw, were armed with heavy sticks.

The noönaut dodged a blow that could have snapped his spine, ducked through the legs of its deliverer and burst out of the bushes into the sunlit clearing. A structure was in his way, its walls an interlacing of withes and flexible canes bound by fibrous cords, its roof a dense mat of woven reeds. Bandar raced around a corner and galloped across the open space, hearing the thudding bootsteps of his pursuers and the rasp of their breathing. They were gaining.

His short pig's legs were trembling and his pig's lungs burned. He looked toward the trees on the other side of the clearing, hoping for a thicker bush, perhaps a bramble, through which he could insinuate himself while his pursuers were deterred. But he saw nothing that would suit and the stick-wielding pig-men were almost on him.

Then from the woods ahead burst a third pig-man, attired like the others, but with an expression of sheer terror disfiguring its already distorted features. This one paid no attention to Bandar but called to the two others, "He's right behind me! He destroyed my house with a single blast!"

The third pig-man sped across the clearing and into the woods. Bandar's pursuers immediately abandoned the chase and ran in the same direction, cries of panic fading in their wake.

Bandar had skidded to a halt, his legs limp as boiled celery, his breath coming in pants. He heard the clatter of the pig-men diminishing as they

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fled through the woods behind him on the far side of the clearing. Then he heard a new sound, an engine-like chuffing growing louder. It came from beyond the nearer trees.

He remembered the discussion of wind and the fleeing pig-man's mention of a house destroyed by a single blast. *An archetypical Storm elemental,* he thought, *an elemental with a yen to destroy weakly constructed buildings — therefore no danger to a bystander pig.* He stood to catch his breath as the huffing and puffing grew louder.

From the darkness under the trees, not far from where Bandar stood, a shape emerged. It was a running figure, knees high and elbows pumping, dressed in black overalls over a red shirt, with a bent and towering hat on its head. But it was the face that caught Bandar's attention — the long muzzle flecked with foam, the red lolling tongue, the cruel, needle-sharp fangs.

Oh, my, he thought, *not just Storm, but Appetite too. An Eater.*

The great golden eyes turned Bandar's way and the idiomat scarcely broke its stride before swerving toward him. *Worse yet,* was Bandar's thought, *Indiscriminate Appetite, an Eat-em-all-up.*

He flung himself back the way he had come, but the slavering pursuer was even faster than the pig-men had been, and here in the clearing there were no obstacles to interpose between the Eater and the virtual Bandar flesh it craved.

He was headed for the stick house, specifically for a wall against which stood a pile of unused building materials. He leapt to the top of the heap, sticks flying from beneath his scrabbling hooves, one of them happily striking the Eater's bulbous nose and causing the pursuer to pull up sharply, though only for the time it took to shake its head and renew the chase.

The pause gave Bandar time to scramble atop the woven roof, cross the peak, and slide down the other side. He heard the beast coming over the roof after him. The trees were too far away; the Appetite would run him down.

Beside Bandar, the door to the house of sticks stood open. He ducked inside and closed the portal after him, glad to see that it was made of thick timbers, closely fitted, and that it had a hinged bar that he could nose into place.

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Scarcely had the barrier been sealed than the Eater struck it with force enough to make the door rattle in its mounts. A second blow followed but the timbers held firm.

Now it grew quiet. Bandar put an eye to a tiny gap in the woven wall and saw that the Eater had drawn some distance away. It sat on its haunches and studied the noönaut's refuge for a few moments, then exhibited the demeanor of one who has thought through a problem and come to a decision.

It began to draw in great gouts of air. Bandar saw its thorax expand and contract to unlikely dimensions, and now he knew what must come. Somehow, this idiomat combined the essentials of the Eater *and* a Storm elemental. He wondered for a moment what demented mythmaker had first welded the two together, then deferred speculation while he sought a way out of the refuge that had become a deadly trap.

The floor was packed dirt. Pigs' hooves ought to make good digging implements. He went to the wall opposite where the Storm-Eater worked to inflate itself and frantically scratched at the earth.

Fortunately, this was a Class Four Situation so the dirt was made of uniformly homogeneous particles, without rocks or boulders to block his passage. The soil flew, piling up behind Bandar's haunches as the hole deepened into a passage under the wall. Above the sound of his own labors he could hear the idiomat chanting, "Let me come in," in a sing-song voice that carried the force of a gusty breeze.

There came a silence as the Eater waited for a response, then the house shook and the door rattled as a blast of air struck the opposite wall. Bandar heard a snapping of sticks and a tearing of cords. He looked back between his legs and saw that the door and the posts that supported it were canted inward. The whole front wall was skewed out of true.

He heard another puffing and huffing. The Eater was refilling its body with a fresh storm. A second blast would surely blow the house in. Bandar dug faster, harder, deeper. Soon there was a pig-sized passage beneath the back wall. He wriggled into the hole, scraped more earth out of his way, the narrow hooves doing a gratifyingly fast and thorough job.

In a moment, he saw a chink of daylight above him. In another moment, the chink had become a swatch, then a fully realized hole. Bandar wriggled through just as the storm smashed the front wall to

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flinders. The strong door crashed to the floor, the outer walls blew out, and the roof fell in. The wall beneath which Bandar squirmed was pulled inward.

But he was out in sunlight and across the clearing, keeping the wreckage of the house between him and the Eater. He could hear it thrashing through the debris, alternately cooing to him and smacking wet lips. Bandar ducked into the undergrowth and lay trembling beneath a bush.

The Eater kicked at the wreckage of the house, searching for him. Then Bandar saw it notice the tunnel he had dug beneath the back wall. The beast squatted and examined the gouge in the earth, sniffed at it with its elongated snout. Then it raised its head and peered about the clearing. Bandar resisted an instinctive urge to draw farther back into the bushes; should his movements shake his branches, the Eater would be on him in seconds.

Its gaze passed over Bandar without seeing him. After a long moment, its head turned in the direction the anthropomorphic pigs had taken and it rose and set off after them. Bandar waited until it was out of sight, then crept from cover. If this was the kind of tale he now thought it was, none of the idiomats would return to this part of the Location until the Situation had completed its cycle and begun anew.

He brought up the great globe of the Commons and examined it as best he could with one eye, then the other. It was easier to see in the clearing's bright sunlight than deep in the Nymph's forest. He found the gate through which he had come from the enchantress's island — it was still a yellow heptagon within a green circle — and saw where he must be: a small mauve spot in the shape of a diamond, with a white stripe running diagonally from one side to another. Squinting his pig's eye, he deduced that the exit gate was not far off, somewhere beyond the brick house, where no doubt the Eater was now laying siege to the three brothers.

Bandar collapsed the map and thought about the Situation. This was clearly an admonitory tale for children, not as he had thought about flexibility versus rigidity, but a very early version of the Three Wayfarers motif that constantly reappeared in endless variations throughout the collective unconscious. It would conclude with one or, more likely, all three of the pig-men turning the tables on the Eater. From the effects of the monster's wind on the house of sticks, Bandar could guess that the Eater

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would fail to blow in the brick house. Then, its elemental power literally blown out, it would somehow be captured and destroyed by the brothers.

Bandar's best course was to position himself where he could observe the Situation's end game. Then during the Pause that always preceded a renewal of the cycle, he could pass through the egress node and move to the next Location: a Landscape of primeval prairie. He might have to dodge vast herds of ruminants and those who hunted them, but more likely he would be alone on a rolling plain of endless grass. The prairie connected to another Location — a mountain valley where no one ever grew old. From there, Bandar could loop back to the snowland where the good Principal granted favors.

He trotted down the forest trail and soon came to the clearing where the little brick house stood. He approached warily, staying within the cover of the undergrowth. He did not see the Eater, but he saw that a painted wooden sign that bore the legend "A. Pig" in cursive script had been blown off the door's lintel to land on a strip of bare earth from which the stalks of petalless flowers grew.

The Eater has blown himself out and is probably even now being dispatched by the pig-men, Bandar thought. He crept to one of the shuttered windows and peered between the slats. Within, he saw the trio gathered about an open fireplace in which a deep black cauldron steamed. The bricklayer held the pot's lid in readiness and all three were regarding the chimney with evident expectation.

Of course, Bandar thought, *the frustrated Eater descends the chimney, is clapped into the pot to become the pig-men's dinner.* The Eater would be eaten by those he would eat: another example of the circular irony which abounded throughout the Commons.

He watched to see the final act of the tale. But moments later, he saw a portion of the floor behind the three pig-men suddenly subside. A dark clawed paw emerge. The brothers did not notice. Another paw emerged, then the head of the Eater, then his torso followed. The monster made lip-smacking noises and now, too late, the pig-men turned and saw the horror emerging from their floor, which was of the same friable earth as at the house of sticks.

The Eater was between the pig-men and the door. The single room was small. The victims displayed fright and panic, the beast a terrible single-mindedness. The ensuing scenes were not pleasant to watch.

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Bandar tore his gaze away and ran as fast as his tired pig's legs would take him in the direction of the exit gate.

He did not fear pursuit by the Eater; the beast would be occupied in feasting for some time. But Bandar was sure the outcome he had just seen was not what was supposed to happen. By inadvertently showing the monster another way into the pig-man's house, he had interfered with the Situation, perverting the idiomats from their prescribed course.

Among noönauts, the term for such adulterated behavior was *disharmony*. To cause a single idiomat to behave in a disharmonious manner could cause ripples. To distort an entire Situation, even a minor one, from its proper conclusion was to ignite the fuse for an explosive manifestation of psychic energy. Bandar had no idea what was about to happen within this Location, but he was certain it would not be good for the errant pig who had triggered it. And he had no wish to experience it.

His noönaut's sense told him that the egress node was a short trot along the forest trail, then across a meadow. He followed the tingling in his awareness and soon was running through generic grass. He pulled up short where the gate should be and chanted the appropriate opening thran. Nothing happened. Again his enhanced hearing told him that his pig's larynx and enlarged nasal chamber were distorting the pitch of the tones.

A sound from behind him made Bandar turn and look. A spiraling vortex had appeared in the air above the brick house. It grew darker as he watched, a miniature whirlwind descending toward the roof. When it touched, dark slates were wrenched loose and sent spinning. A cracking, grinding noise grew in volume as the vortex broke up the timbers of the roof. Beams flew, rafters shot out in all directions like missiles.

Now the tornado bored deeper into the structure and Bandar turned back to the gate. He chanted the thran again, but knew the notes were off key. Behind him came a rumbling, clattering noise. It sounded as if every brick in the pig-man's house was vibrating and bashing against its neighbors, and behind that the whirring roar of the whirlwind grew louder and louder. He could hear limbs cracking from trees and the ground beneath his hooves shook like a nervous beast.

The part of Bandar that was more pig than human — a part that grew larger, he now realized, whenever he was gripped by fear — wanted to do nothing but run away. He had to force himself to breathe calmly. He did not look behind him, and did his best to ignore the thunderous cacophony

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of destruction that battered at his sensitive ears.

He shaped his jowly cheeks *so*, and put his tongue *here* and tried once more. The thran was only three descending notes, then an octave's jump. Even Chundlemars could have done it on first try. That realization angered the human side of Bandar. The anger seemed to help. He chanted the three and one and the air rippled obligingly.

Before he stepped toward the fissure, he took a look back. After all, no Commons sojourner in living memory had witnessed a full meltdown of a Situation, even a Class Four. He could never mention this episode — how Gabbris would gloat — but he owed himself a last glance.

Immediately, he wished he hadn't. The trees all around the house had been stripped of their leaves and blown flat. The structure itself was spinning like a square top, the individual bricks of which it was made holding their relation to each other though separated by wide gaps through which burst eye-searing flashes of intense violet and electric blue light.

The house spun faster and faster, the blasts of painful light coming in sharper paroxysms. Bandar saw the pig-men and the Eater thrown around in the heart of the whirlwind, like torn rags with flopping limbs, each burst of blinding illumination penetrating their flesh to show gaping wounds and fractured bones. Above the roaring of the wind Bandar heard a hum like an insane dynamo. The sound became a whine, then a shriek, climbing through the frequency scale until it rose even above the pitch that pigs could hear.

Not good, Bandar said to himself. He scuttled toward the gate. But the last glance back had meant he had waited too long. He did not hear the explosion; it reached him as a shock wave, picking him off his hooves and hurling him through the fissure. He rolled and tumbled across a grassy prairie, the gate behind him still open, blasts of wind and beams of non-light streaming through the gap.

Bandar got his feet under him and struggled against the wind back toward the node. Objects struck him, none of them large enough to do harm though he heard something heavy thrum past his head.

The gate remained open. *That's not supposed to happen*. He chanted a closure thran, then had to repeat the notes before the node would seal completely and the light and wind died. That, too, was something he had never seen. Gates closed automatically. Closure thrans were only for the

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rare circumstance when a noönaut opened a gate, then decided not to go through it.

With him and after him had come through the gate elements of the previous Location: some bricks, a hand-sized piece of slate, some fragments of wood and a few unrecognizable gobbets of flesh and splinters of bone. They lay strewn around him, but as he watched all of the debris melted into the long grass of the prairie, like water seeping into a sponge.

I've never heard of that, Bandar thought. Material from one Location, whether inert or "living," was not transferable to another. Experiments had been tried in the distant past and the principle of locational inviolability was unquestioned. Now Bandar had witnessed a definite crossover. His report would make quite a stir, if he ever dared to tell what he had seen and, more culpably, what he had done. And if he ever made it back to human form and out of the Commons without being absorbed and lost forever.

He turned now and scanned the prairie, saw nothing to cause alarm. Far off above the eastern horizon a vast storm cloud towered into the otherwise open sky and he saw flickers of lightning from its base. In the same direction he could see tiny dots against the darkening skyline. *A herd of ruminants*, he thought, remembering the horned and shaggy beasts, herding in their millions, that were an essential feature of this Landscape.

Neither storm nor herd concerned Bandar. He deployed and examined the globular map. There were several gates on the prairie, none of them far away, as if the Location had been designed as a transit zone for wayfarers. There were a number of such nodal gatherings in the Commons, and some scholars had advanced the notion that the convenience of their existence argued for the noösphere having been intelligently designed. Others held that random distribution could as readily account for the clumping of gates. Besides, the prospect of intelligent design raised the question: by whom? And that led back to the conundrum of a conscious unconscious — a knot that the scholastic community preferred to leave unpicked.

As did Guth Bandar at this moment. He determined that the gate to Happy Valley was about a quarter day's walk to the east. From there he would jump to the snow kingdom and beg a transformation from its Principal. Then he would summon an emergency gate and plop back into his body in the Institute's meditation room.

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He set off toward the gate, his spirits bruised but resuscitated. He wondered if he could draft a monograph on the meltdown of the Class Four Situation without specifying the events that had triggered it. Perhaps he could profess ignorance of the cause while detailing the results. Anyone who visited the Location would find it back in its cycle; the idiomats would know nothing of what had happened to their previous incarnations and all evidence of Bandar's inadvertent tampering would have dissolved.

The more he thought about it, the more possible a paper became. He began to flesh out the essential elements of thesis, argument, and recapitulation. The point to be made was that cross-Locational transfer was indeed possible. Perhaps such things happened often, though only at the end of a Location's cycle when any sensible noönaut would absent himself rather than risk absorption.

That's it, Bandar thought. *I'll say I bravely stayed to witness the cycle's renewal and thus saw the movement of material through the gate.* He would transform his own folly into courage and produce a commendable result. Didrick Gabbris would chew his cuff in envious gall.

Cheered, Bandar trotted on, composing the first lines of the projected essay as he went. Thus occupied, he did not notice what was before him until he felt the first gusts of wind on his pig's face and the first trembling of the ground beneath his hooves.

He was at the base of a small rise, its covering of long grass leaning toward him under the pressure of a growing east wind. He climbed the slope and looked beyond it.

As far as he could see, to left and to right in the rapidly failing light, the world was a sea of humping, bumping shapes. A million animals were on the move. And they were moving toward him.

Above the herd, the sky was almost black with lowering storm clouds, the narrow band between them and the earth whipped by rain and rattling sheets of hail. Lightning crackled and thunder rolled across the prairie. The herd moaned and blundered on.

Behind Bandar was nothing but open plain; no cover, no obstacle to break the onslaught of millions of hooves. He could not outrun them on his short, tired pig's legs. To left and right was only grass. But ahead, between him and the oncoming herd, the land sloped down to a small river, barely more than a stream, that wound its way like a contented snake across the prairie. In places, flash floods had cut deep into the thick

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sod and the clay beneath, leaving the stream to trickle between high banks. And one of those places was not far.

Bandar dug his hooves into the prairie sod and raced down the slope, the wind battering him now and the rumble of the herd's coming shaking the earth like a constant tectonic temblor. He did not look at the animals but fixed his eyes on where the river must be, for he had lost sight of it as soon as he had left the top of the low rise.

The thunder of massed hooves now equaled the voice of the storm. They would be on him in moments and still he had not found the river. He wondered if he had somehow veered from his course on the unmarked plain to run parallel to his only hope of salvation. But even as he conceived the thought, the quaking ground suddenly disappeared from beneath his hooves and he plunged into a gully as deep as he was tall — or as tall as he would be were he still in human form.

He hit the shallow water with a shock to his forehooves and immediately scrambled to the far bank where the clay had been hollowed out by a past flood. He pressed himself sideways against the cold wall, feeling it cool his heaving flanks, unable to hear his own panting over the crescendo of hooves heading his way.

Something dark hurtled above him, the herd's first fleet outrunner leaping the gully. Then a second and another, then five more crossing the gap as fast as a drum roll. Now the body of the herd arrived, with the storm right behind it, and the light in the gully dimmed to a crepuscular shadow. But there was nothing Bandar wanted to see. He closed his eyes and hoped that the bank above him would not crumble and bury him beneath earth and thrashing hooves.

The stampede went on and on, but the soil above Bandar was woven through with the roots of tough prairie grass. It did not give way. In time, it seemed that the shaking of the ground lessened and that the thunder had rolled on across the plain. Bandar opened his eyes. Beasts were still hurtling over his head but there were gaps between them; the sky he glimpsed through those gaps was a sullen gray rather than an angry black.

A few more animals leapt the gully, then two more, then a single straggler, and now, all at once, the herd had passed. Bandar edged out from under the overhang, wondering how he could scale the almost vertical clay wall and resume his journey. But the herd had left him a stepping stone: not far away lay the carcass of a beast that had plunged into the little

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canyon and snapped its neck against the west wall. It lay on its side. Bandar was sure he could climb onto its rib cage and from there jump to the eastern lip of the gully.

He trotted toward the dead ruminant, looking for the easiest point on the great corpse to begin his ascent. Thus he was almost upon it before he noticed that the tail, which should have been long and thick and tipped by a tassel of coarse hair, was instead short, hairless, and curled like a corkscrew. The animal's shoulders and chest, both of which should have been covered by a dense, woolly pelt, were naked and hairless. And now, as Bandar circled the carcass, he saw the head: jowly and wrinkled, with sightless little eyes and a squared-off snout that he had last seen on the face of an enraged pig-man who had sought to crack his spine with a cudgel.

That's not right, Bandar said. Farther down the gully, another animal had fallen on rocks, breaking its back. It still lived and was making guttural grunts that Bandar recognized. He had heard the same sounds under the olive trees on the Nymph's island — pig sounds. *No, not right at all.*

Bandar went back to the dead beast and examined it closely. It was not quite a pig, though it was decidedly piglike. But it had horns and was easily four times the size of even the most prize-winning swine, and the color was wrong. It was someone's idea of how a pig and a herd beast would look if their gene plasms were mashed together.

Bandar had no doubt that this beast was a result of trans-Locational contamination. Which meant he would have an even more interesting paper to present, although the degree of his culpability had just taken a quantum leap. If his role in this event became known, he would be branded a vandal and forbidden ever to enter the Commons except as all humankind did, in his dreams.

He climbed onto the dead animal and jumped to the east lip of the gully. The sky ahead was clearing, gray clouds scudding aside to reveal patches of blue. He called up the globe of the Commons again and determined that he was not more than an hour's trot from the egress node. He set off with mixed feelings: glad to be nearer to deliverance but uncomfortably aware that the fused idiomats he had left dead and dying in the gully were a reproach to him.

He had not gone far before the wind that had been beating at his face

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faded and died away. He lifted his head and smelled the rain-scoured air. He could not wait to be restored to human form, but he would miss some of the pig's senses, especially the breadth and subtlety of the world of odors.

He trotted on, letting his mind wander, smelling the crushed grass and the various scents of small flowers that appeared here and there along his way. The wind changed direction, but he did not take account of it when it freshened and gusted against his hams. Then a sudden squall brought the sting of hail.

He paused and looked over his shoulder. The sky was dark to the west where the storm had gone, but now he saw that the clouds had rebuilt themselves and were sweeping back toward him. *That's peculiar,* he thought.

He looked up at the roiling vapors, shot through with flashes of lightning. *That's peculiar, too,* he thought, seeing that the flashes seemed tinged with blue and even purple instead of bright actinic white light.

He watched for a moment longer, then felt a shiver go through his body that had nothing to do with the chill wind. The sparse hairs on his neck rose and Bandar's pig's limbs began to tremble and his spine began to shake. His pig's lower jaw dropped open and he gaped at the vision that was forming in the cloud.

It was a vast shape, the most enormous face he had ever seen, but he recognized it: the long muzzle lined with teeth and ending in a twitching nose, the pointed ears turned his way, the suggestion of a crooked hat towering into the sky, and the huge eyes, lit from within by lightning, that were looking back at him.

More than pig-man stuff had been blown through the gate from the exploding Class Four Situation: the Storm-Eater had come too, and it remembered him.

The immense face of Appetite rushed toward him, carried on a sweep of wind and chill rain. Bandar ran.

THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS, through the personal unconscious of every human being, engages in a constant dialogue with each of us. So went the opening sura of Afrani's *Explaining and Exploring the Noösphere,* the first text encountered by students at the

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Institute for Historical Inquiry. *We may address our questions, our thoughts, our hopes and expectations to the noösphere in direct and pointed queries, but it will always and only reply through indirection and coincidence.*

Bandar knew his Afrani by heart. It was every neophyte's first assignment, undertaken not only for the knowledge of the book's contents but for the necessary taming and strengthening of memory.

The words *indirection and coincidence* now rang in his mind as he fled across the grasslands, the roaring, devouring Storm-Eater at his back. The Commons never spoke directly, he knew. Even when it spoke through those who had demolished the barriers between conscious and unconscious — the oracles and the irredeemably insane — its language was always one of riddle and allusion.

Bandar could see that he had been enmeshed in a sequence of coincidences ever since he had left the forest of the Loreleis. The Nymph had turned him into a pig, then he had landed in a Situation where pig-men were the idiomats. The Nymph had turned her donkeys into pursuing hounds — why do that, when donkey hooves could be just as lethal to a small pig as canine fangs? — then he had been chased by an Eater with decidedly houndlike characteristics. And now he was being harried again by a similar manifestation of the idiomat, though now it sought to sizzle him with lightning bolts instead of clamping sharp teeth into his porcine flesh.

In the waking world, coincidences were often just the hazards of chance — a coin could be tossed and come up heads ten times in a row — but in the Commons coincidences were never a mere coincidence. Concurrency was the language of the noösphere. There was meaning here, a message.

And what could the message be? The thought rattled in Bandar's pig's brain as he galloped on tiring legs across the gently rolling landscape, while bolts of fluorescent energy struck behind and all around him. *What question did I put*? he wondered.

He had wanted to know about the Song of songs, the Ur-melody wired into the human brain. But now, as he turned the question over in his mind, examining it from all angles, he could not discover even the most tangential relationship to his present predicament.

But if not the Lorelei's song, then what? A blast of lightning lit the

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storm-darkened landscape ahead of him and he swerved around the charred and smoking gouge it had made in the prairie sod. Of course, direct questions to the Commons never brought a clear answer. The key to receiving a message was to think about something else. Then the unconscious would steal through the back door, to leave its offering like the gifts of fairy sprites who labor through the night while their beneficiary snores, all unawares, in his bed.

So as he ran Bandar turned his thoughts elsewhere, though it was a difficult task with lethal blasts striking all around him. But he took the attempts on his life as encouragement — what better way to get his attention? — and set his disciplined mind, even housed in a porcine brain, to the work. He rehearsed his activities before entering the Commons. He had dined with the vicedean of applied metaphysics; he had filled an order of off-world dyes and fixatives for a longstanding customer (Bandar ran an inherited family commerciant firm, hence his status at the Institute as only an adjunct scholar); he had reprimanded Chundlemars; he had sketched an outline of his Lorelei paper.

And now it came to him. His pig's tongue and lips could not put it into words, but he could make the appropriate sounds.

"Hmmm," he said, in the tones of one who has seen the light, then, "Um hmm," again to indicate acceptance of the revelation.

Another flash lit up the landscape and by its light, just ahead, Bandar saw an unlikely sight: a hummock of prairie land was transforming itself into another shape. In moments, Bandar found himself rushing toward a small but sturdy brick house, its stout door invitingly open.

He crossed the threshold at a gallop, skidded on his hooves as he turned to get his nose behind the door and push it closed. The wind resisted his efforts but he found renewed strength and when the door met its jamb, a lock clicked and the barrier stood proof against the storm.

The single room was bereft of furniture although there were three framed pictures on the back wall, each portraying an anthropomorphically rendered pig in a stiff-collared shirt and dark suit. Centered in the same wall was a wide and tall fireplace with a black cauldron simmering over a well-stoked blaze. Bandar crossed to the kettle and found that the handle of its lid had been designed to fit a pig's trotter, confirming his surmise of what must be done.

He balanced on his hind legs and slipped a forehoof into the handle

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and prised the lid from the cauldron. It came easily. No sooner was the cover free than the chimney rattled to a downdraft of cold air. Sparks flew and smoke billowed, setting Bandar's eyes to water and causing him to vent an explosive sneeze.

But even blind he could hear the *sploosh* of something solid arriving in the cauldron. He immediately clapped the lid back into place. The kettle rumbled and shook but Bandar leaned his weight onto the leaping, vibrating top until the commotion ceased.

Outside the storm had ended. Beams of sunlight angled through the windows to illuminate the smoky air inside the house. *Now what*? Bandar wondered, and even as he did so his eye fell upon something he had not noticed before: a substantial ladle hanging beside the chimney.

Its handle, too, was shaped to fit a pig's hoof. He took it down, then removed the cauldron's lid. A dark broth sent up steamy wisps of vapor. It smelled delicious. Bandar dipped the ladle and tasted the soup.

The broth tasted as rich as it smelled, but Bandar got no more than his first sip. As the stuff entered him, he saw the hoof that held the ladle

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become a hand once more, the foreleg become an arm. His back straightened and his legs set themselves under him again. He became a man standing in a little brick house; then the structure faded and he found himself atop a low rise.

The noönaut wasted no time in calling up an emergency gate. The air opened before him and he wanted to throw himself immediately forward. But he paused and said to the bright blue sky, "I will let them know."

A moment later he was looking through his own eyes at the worn furniture of the Institute's meditation room. He stretched the kinks out of his joints and muscles, rose, and performed the usual exercises. When his body felt as if it fit him again, he crossed to the door that led out to the forum where students were wont to gather between classes.

He strode forcefully toward a group seated on the grass beneath a hanging wystol tree. Most of them looked up in curiosity; one showed alarm at being the focus of Bandar's gaze. The youth rose to his feet, a fearful apprehension seizing his features.

Bandar said, "Chundlemars, I wish you to come with me."

Chundlemars swallowed and said, "Master, I have thought better of my earlier observations about the noösphere's awareness. I withdraw them."

"Withdraw?" said Bandar. "To the contrary! You will expound them to me at length. You are henceforward my research assistant."

Chundlemars blinked. His chin fell toward his chest and remained there.

"Don't stand there gaping!" Bandar said, seizing the underclassman by one protruding ear and compelling him toward Bandar's study. "The Commons is awake and aware! It demands our attention!"

"What must we do?" said Chundlemars.

"What must we do?" said Bandar. "My boy, we are scholars, and the Great Colloquium is but a week away. We must quickly compose a thesis to grind Didrick Gabbris into a malodorous powder!"

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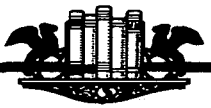

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Good Girl Wants It Bad, by Scott Bradfield, Carroll & Graf, 2004, $13.

I RAN across an article in the newspaper recently (recently being late August, 2004) that just left me shaking my head. It seems that researchers at King's College in London, England, have boiled the elements of a perfect scary film down to a science, putting together an actual equation that genre filmmakers can follow.

The first question it begs is, what brain trust put up the money for a research project such as this? Couldn't the money used to fund a project this moronic have been put to better use? Disease research, perhaps, or simply used to help alleviate world poverty and hunger?

I like the way the article put it: "Actually, the only equation that seems relevant here is nerds + too much funding – any and all accountability + no women = stupid formulas for horror movies." Because really, isn't the whole point of storytelling that we (either readers or viewers) *don't* know what's coming next?

I mention all of this because at the same time as the article appeared, I was reading Scott Bradfield's *Good Girl Wants It Bad*, which is about as far from formula storytelling as you can get.

To start with, it's not told in a traditional linear fashion. Mostly, it's the diary of Delilah "Lah" Riordan, a nineteen-year-old convicted serial killer awaiting her execution at the West Texas Women's Penitentiary, with the narrative jumping around from her current situation to events in the past.

Lah considers herself to be an innocent, good girl who's had some bad breaks and is basically misunderstood. And oh yes, she's had to kill a few people, but it was never really her fault. But her actions, whenever one of these incidents is

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recounted, don't jibe with her protestations of blamelessness.

The truth is, she's completely self-absorbed, and listening in on her diary entries is like watching a train wreck. You don't want to look, but you can't look away.

Bradfield has done quite a wonderful job with Lah's voice — it's often warm and genuinely funny (though the humor is rather mordant at times). The real horror of the novel is how you find yourself sort of liking this seemingly vacuous but well-meaning young woman — and then she throws in some brutal comment that jars you back into the realization that she is, in fact, a serial killer, without much to redeem her since she doesn't feel one iota of remorse. All she has is excuses, the most prevalent one being that the majority of the killings were done by her ex-boyfriend, a motorcycle-riding Mexican boy named Manuel who's been stalking her ever since they broke up.

There isn't much evidence that he exists, although (according to her diary) she has conversations with him, even in prison, and claims that he fathered the daughter she had to give up when she entered prison.

For a book about a serial killer, there's little graphic description of her deeds, which is fine with me, because do we need more of that? When one of the murders is recounted, it's usually in the clinical text taken from a police report.

No, as I mentioned above, the real horror of this book is the amorality of the character. But it makes for a fascinating read, morbid and, at times, uncomfortably funny.

Through Violet Eyes, by Stephen Woodworth, Dell, 2004, $6.99.

It strikes me that there are two kinds of books that we like ("we" being readers in general): those with stories and characters we care about, and those that feature remarkable prose. They can all be found in one book, of course, but it seems to me that as soon as you start admiring the *way* the author is using his or her prose, you're no longer in the story.

That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it sort of defeats the whole idea of a good story where the prose is supposed to support the characters and their stories. On the other hand, how often do you go back and reread a book where all the prose does is support the characters and plot? I know I don't, even though I certainly enjoy those books when

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I'm reading them (and when they get it all right — characters I care about, a plot that keeps me guessing).

So perhaps it's a backhanded compliment to say that Stephen Woodworth's *Through Violet Eyes* has a great cast of characters, a smooth-flowing plot, and a great premise, with prose that's invisible and calls no attention to itself (which is not an easy trick, by the way).

Woodworth purports a time when a certain small segment of the population (physically noticeable by their violet-colored eyes) has the ability to allow the dead to borrow their bodies. The dead come knocking at a violet's mind and, depending on the violet's amount of control, they can either be kept out or let in.

Woodworth doesn't get heavily into all the ramifications of this (there is a story to be told, after all), but the teasers that don't relate to the main plot are tantalizing. Such as Beethoven entering the mind of a musician violet and writing new work now that he can hear again. Or the heavy-handed tactics of the government agency that trains and hires out violets. What we see mostly is how the violets are used in crime detection, where victims can enter the mind of a violet and relate how they were killed, and by whom.

Of course, if you don't get to see your murderer, that's not much help, and that's the problem facing our characters as an FBI agent and a violet work to stop a masked serial killer who is systematically killing violets.

I had a great time with this book, and will most likely read Woodworth's next (you get a preview of *With Red Hands* in the back of the current novel). But, like a good TV show, while it was diverting, and I certainly appreciated the diversion it gave me, I doubt I'll return to it for a second reading.

Fantasy Life, by Mario Milosevic, Ruby Rose's Fairy Tale Emporium, 2004, $13.

Animal Life, by Mario Milosevic, Ruby Rose's Fairy Tale Emporium, 2004, $13.

Every so often the perfect, if unexpected, book shows up in my P.O. box. Or in this case, the pleasure was doubled because two collections by Mario Milosevic made their appearance one morning.

I've been a great fan of Milosevic's writing for years now, tracking

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his poems down in on-line publications and literary journals, and always hoping for a collection to bring them all together. So, having no idea that collections were finally forthcoming, I was both surprised and delighted to come upon this pair of books.

The reason for this is simple. Unlike prose (especially such as discussed in *Through Violet Eyes* above), poetry *requires* remarkable language. That language might be warm and beautiful, it might be hard and harsh, but whatever else it does, it must make us sit up and take notice.

Poetry also doesn't require a narrative structure, nor even characters. But it does need to present us with views of the world, or an emotional state, that we had never considered before. The words and the view they present must surprise us, or move us. It must make us angry, or sad, or content, or give us a sense of hope or peace.

In other words, poetry requires an emotional investment both from the writer and the reader, and where we meet is where the magic happens.

Milosevic has done this for me in poem after poem that I've come across in the aforementioned, sometimes obscure, sources. But still I'll admit to a touch of worry that reading each book through might lessen the impact of the individual pieces. That I might grow too accustomed to his voice, or his way of viewing the world, and what seemed fresh and alive in small bites wouldn't affect me in the same way if I had a whole meal placed before me.

I shouldn't have worried. If anything, I'm even more enamored with his work after finishing these two books.

Fantasy Life seems the most appropriate of the two for discussion in this column, with its science fictional, fantasy, or simply disarmingly strange views of both inner and outer landscapes. I'll probably never view a phone the same again after reading "The Secret Life of Telephones," while "Upon a Star," in its few brief words, evokes a resonating blend of folklore, alienation, and one simple, bittersweet image.

But with its mythic undertones and curious combinations of the natural world with the one inside our heads, the companion collection proves as rewarding for those of us who appreciate a sense of wonder.

Milosevic is the author of one of my all-time favorite poems, and happily, it's available in *Animal Life*. It's called "When I Was" and part of what makes it work so well for me — beyond the simple yet

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gorgeous language and its mythic substance — is how the verses lead so perfectly into each other. Quoting from it really wouldn't do it justice, so let me direct you instead to the wonderful Endicott Studio site where you can find the poem in its entirety: *http://www.endicott-studio.com/*.

Click on the "Coffeehouse" link and you'll find it, as well as two or three others by him. If you look around the site, you'll find two or three more by him as well.

I know that poetry is highly subjective. What works for one reader leaves another cold. But all I can say is that, in this household, any new Milosevic verse is a happy find; these two collections have proved to be a treasure trove.

There are thirty worthy reprints here and one hundred thirty-three new poems. If your local book store can't get you copies, you can order them on-line from: *http://www.lulu.com/*

Or if you like reading on a PDA (and what better way to spend some time waiting in a line than to read a few poems?), direct your browser to: *www.ebookad.com*

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

Going Postal, by Terry Pratchett, HarperCollins, 2004, $24.95.

Abarat: Days of Magic, Nights of War, by Clive Barker, Joanna Cotler Books, 2004, $24.99.

The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant: The Runes of Earth, by Stephen R. Donaldson, Putnam, 2004, $26.95.

I'VE OFTEN written here that mood and reading are intertwined for me — that one follows the other, depending on how much I have to give a book in the time, attention, and emotional involvement departments. There are days when I'm so drained of one, or all, of these that I can only drift through books where the lines are simple and the emotional cost light; there are days when I'm so bright-eyed that almost everything strikes me as incomplete, simple, and predictable. Often it can be the same book.

Terry Pratchett is one of the few authors that I can read at any time, and in any state of mind.

What is so quintessentially Pratchett, so much at the heart of his work, that makes that transition possible? You never have to turn the critical faculties off, for one. If you examine everything he says — or everything any of his characters say — there's a very clear-eyed, pragmatic, and almost direly cynical view of the world and the people in it that accords with bitter experience. Yes, he's funny, and much of his humor is derived from the cynicism.

But having said that...Terry Pratchett is also capable of a great deal of sentiment and affection. Believing that people are exactly as pathetic and delusional as they are, he somehow manages to present this truth as if there were great joy to be taken from it. And because he does, there is. You can believe in

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the shifting quicksands; he can tell you clearly that they won't carry you or hold you up, he can say it with words — but they somehow do; you defy gravity, look at the murk beneath your feet, and are even glad it's there. It's a gift I've found in almost no other writer, certainly none of this generation.

And no book of his is a clearer example of this strange dichotomy of text and reaction than *Going Postal*, his latest adult Discworld offering.

In it, one Moist von Lipwig is touched by an Angel. The fact that the angel happens to be the dire and unpredictable Lord Vetinari has to be taken in stride; it's Ankh-Morpork, after all, and Vetinari is probably the closest thing there is to an Angel in the vicinity. Well, okay, at least he's competent.

Why Moist von Lipwig needs an Angel is part of the novel's strange grace: He's a con artist. He's a man who looks so honest, so guileless, and so slightly stupid that he can trick anyone into thinking they can trick him out of whatever it is he happens to be trying to sell them. Which, of course, is usually worthless. It's got him in a bit of trouble. And Vetinari is, out of a spirit of generosity attributable only to Vetinari — which is to say, twisted and next to none — offering him his one chance to *get it right this time*. But because Vetinari isn't a fool, the two large strings attached to Moist von Lipwig are called Mr. Pump, a very literal Golem (there really isn't any other kind) and the position of Postmaster at the ancient, towering and quite useless Ankh-Morpork Post Office.

The Post Office comes with two (unpaid) employees — an ancient Junior Postman named Mr. Groat and a less ancient and not quite right young man named Stanley. Oh, and an awful lot of undelivered mail.

It's the job of a lifetime. Literally. And if Moist can't up the ante and use the skills he's developed in a life of crime, that lifetime can be measured in days.

This is a book about Hope — mostly of the variety that makes people stupid. And in fact, it's a book about stupid people, because without the stupid, there's no Hope. It is *also* a book about smart people, because without the smart, there's no one to take advantage of the peculiar grace and value of stupidity.

It's a book that many people have said reminds them of Pratchett's extremely well-loved novels about the Watch — but it's

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not a book *about* the Watch. It is, rather, a book about governing a city. Sort of. Von Lipwig is the anti-Vimes; he's not a man who believes, and hates believing in a world that gives him so little purchase; he's a man who doesn't believe. In anything.

Which is part of what makes the book so satisfying.

Pratchett could write Discworld novels until the skies collapsed, and I would be the happiest reader alive. They only get better with time. They *always* get better with time.

Pratchett's Discworld is often described in asides that might come out of a lunatic's travel guide. He frequently mentions strange Ankh-Morporkian sights that seem like blips on the radar. I love those.

Which makes my reaction to Barker's Abarat — admittedly a universe so unlike the Discworld that I probably shouldn't compare them — a bit odd. Barker's second venture into this world (after *Abarat*, 2002) once again features young Candy Quackenbush and Malingo, the former slave that she freed. It features the Criss-Cross man and showcases Christopher Carrion, the Lord of Midnight. A word: each hour of the day in Abarat is an island, a geographical location. One can cross the waters and travel, spending a very long stretch of time in one hour, and seeing no change of day or night; Day and Night are locations here.

And the first several chapters of this novel are taken up with... locations. With long descriptions of the peculiar, dark vision that has always inhabited Barker's fiction. There is a sense, impervious to all action and story, that this is a voyage, and the tour-guide is stopping along the way to point out the more visually interesting elements of landscape and inhabitants along the way. Unfortunately — for me — some of those elements feel like window dressing; akin to the research that has been so much labor it's all been jammed into the book, regardless of whether or not it fits.

Candy and Malingo are on a leisurely flight from the Criss-Cross man, and while they're at it, they might as well see more of the world. The Criss-Cross man is on a flight away from pretty certain and unpleasant death if he doesn't find Candy and bring her to the Lord of Midnight. But Candy has power in her — a power that she's not aware of until she needs it — and with that power comes a lot of uncomfortable questions.

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Who is she? Why does she have power at all? Why does Abarat feel as if it's her real home, when she's spent most of her life in the unfortunately named Chickentown in the real world?

It's only when the sightseeing elements fall away, when the tonal use of the imagery meshes with the internal voyage of the characters — Candy in particular, as she gropes her way toward understanding the mystery of her existence — that the book comes to life. In fact, it's when the story shifts from the external reality of Abarat to the internals of the horribly evil and strangely compelling Carrion.

There's pathos and an unflinching honesty in the depiction of Carrion, in the varied flavors of love, and the way we break its meaning or build on it, that make, in the end, a compelling read. There's never so much violence (and certainly no sex) that this couldn't be the Young Adult novel it claims to be — but Barker has never been the world's most settling read.

This book reminds me, in odd ways, of C. S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, but stripped of Christianity, updated, modernized, and threaded throughout with a glittering sort of ugly that's almost beautiful. I read, somewhere, that Disney bought media rights to Abarat as a whole — and I honestly cannot imagine what they're going to do with them.

But if you feel hesitant about picking it up, if for some reason you didn't fall in love with the first book, this one is stronger, and in its own way, heartbreaking.

In 1977, the leprous Thomas Covenant, one of modern fantasy's more controversial protagonists, was first introduced to the fantasy field by the promising new writer Stephen R. Donaldson. Thomas Covenant was an ordinary man living in an ordinary world until the day he was diagnosed with leprosy. Although the world was ordinary, Covenant wasn't, and he found out that the word "leper" still had strong social consequences. He lost his family, his physical health, and eventually — or so he thought — his sanity; he traveled to The Land, a world that was patently so much psychosis to his rational mind.

This first novel — and Covenant's first of six appearances — hit readers with all the mildness of an abortion argument; there were very few who *didn't* have an opinion about Covenant, or Donaldson, after they'd read it (or tried).

But Covenant bore the title

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"The Unbeliever" for a reason; he didn't believe in The Land. He told himself many things about his lack of belief, and one of them was that actions played out in dreams have no consequences. He wanted something; he wasn't bound by social rules because he wasn't in the "real" world; he satisfied a need. The problem — as any reader could have figured out at that point — was that it *wasn't* a dream. The Land, replete with giants, magic, and shadowy figures of evil, was of course real.

The bitter consequences of his action took six books to resolve, as the Unbeliever began his long struggle toward redemption.

Now, after a hiatus of twenty-two years, Donaldson is returning to The Land.

Or rather, Linden Avery is. First introduced in *The Second Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* as an emotionally broken person who accompanies Covenant as his doctor, she was forced to grow beyond the psychologically crippling reality of life on Earth; her ties to The Land were strong, and she didn't suffer from lack of belief. Through her actions and Covenant's eventual act of nobility, The Land was saved.

But the real world to which Linden Avery returned, changed, went on without Covenant. In his place was the mad woman Covenant had once promised to love and cherish — the wife who abandoned him.

Linden Avery is still a doctor. She has taken the burden of Joan upon her own shoulders. But Joan has been silent and unreachable for ten years; not much of a companion.

It isn't until Linden meets Jeremiah that she finds a cause as important as the saving of The Land. She adopts him. Damaged, uncommunicative, he is the focus of her life when she isn't working at the institute.

When Roger, the son of Covenant and Joan, shows up unexpectedly to claim custody of his mother, Linden knows he's trouble. Trouble, not in the mundane sense of the word, but in the magical sense: The Land is somehow involved. And with the Land, Lord Foul, the Despiser. Afraid, but caught in this reality, she accepts this truth in time to lose everything — and she's translated, along with Roger and Joan, to The Land, only to find that the Despiser has her son.

The first two hundred pages of this book are scattered throughout with so many references to the earlier books, they play the sort of catch-up that almost feels like

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infodump. The rest of the book loses that forced familiarity as Linden struggles to master magics she's never used. When Covenant died, Linden kept the white gold ring that was the source of his power in The Land. It's still a source of power — it's just not hers.

Linden is not Covenant. The twisted remorse and the desperate need to take as little responsibility as possible that almost defined Covenant mean nothing to her; she is — in the Donaldson canon — an entirely sympathetic character, with a clear motivation. Does she have doubts? Yes. But she can't let them overwhelm her if she's to do what she set out to do: save her son.

It becomes clear, however, that in saving her son she's fulfilling some part of her ancient enemy's plan — and while this book is almost entirely straightforward, the ending of it leaves little doubt that things are going to bunch, knot, and twist — because people can do many things in the name of love, and the test of her character, which hasn't even started — will be answered by the question *how much*? Donaldson gives us a glimpse of what he does best here as he lays the foundations for what's to come.

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Perhaps this story was inspired by the hackberry tree in Robert Reed's front yard. Perhaps not. Regardless, it's probably a safe bet to say that very few people with trees in their yards could have made the imaginative leaps this story makes. Take a look and see—

From Above

By Robert Reed

CUB SCOUTS WENT INTO the little wood to practice their survival skills, but that excuse was soon forgotten. One boy thought it would be fun, really fun, to chop down a tree. And not just a little tree, either. An old hackberry seemed as good a victim as any, and he convinced the others to slip home to find axes and other tools. The mayhem commenced soon after that, and for nearly twenty minutes the air sang with the ringing of metal against living wood. The tree was pretty well girdled and doomed, but they were a long way from dropping it. Work stopped long enough to consider options. "My dad's got this huge fat chain saw," one boy reported. Here was a dangerous and very exciting escalation of the destruction. Just mentioning the saw was enough to make most of the boys shiver and smile to themselves, imagining the roar of the engine and the big tree toppling, perhaps pulling down the neighboring trees with it.

Manny was the exception. He was younger, and smaller, and by most measures, quite a bit smarter than the others. He was the only boy who knew that the tree was a hackberry, and that by cutting its phloem, they

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had insured its death. When others imagined the splendid shattering of wood and a mastering of their universe, he thought of tiny animals losing their lives and homes. He saw sunlight pouring onto this still-shady ground, the world thrown into a new order. But what could he do? The eleven-year-olds looked like giants, powerful and sure, and even on the best days, it took all of Manny's creativity and charm to survive in their world. He couldn't change what was happening. His only hope was that it was almost time to go home, which is why Manny was glancing at his watch when he heard a very clear, very close voice saying, "You stupid stupid stupid sacks of water."

Every other face lifted, surprise bleeding into rage. Then the biggest boy — their self-appointed leader — glared at Manny. "What the hell did you call me?"

"Nothing," the nine-year-old squeaked. "It wasn't me — "

"You mindless hunk of flotsam."

"Then who's talking?" another boy asked.

Who indeed?

"Hey, what's that?" a third boy called out.

Floating behind Manny, almost invisible in the hackberry's shadow, was a balloon. Or was it? The object seemed to be about the size and height of a man's head. But it was shiny and perfectly round, and even in the gloom, every boy could see himself reflected in its face.

"It's a balloon," the biggest boy said.

Hardly.

"How come it isn't moving?" another Cub Scout asked.

Their leader scrunched his face into a skeptical frown. "It's tied down somehow. We just can't see the string."

"Why didn't we notice till now?" asked Manny.

Then he answered his own question. "Because it just got here. That's why."

The boys fanned out, surrounding the mysterious object. Nobody saw string, yet the object hung perfectly motionless in the dark air, and after a minute of silence, the voice screamed at them again, crying out, "Tyranny."

"What's that?" one boy asked.

"Your circumstance," the ball said.

"My what?"

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Manny listened to the voice, but it didn't sound like anyone at all. Not a man or woman, or anybody he knew.

Again, the object said, "Tyranny."

"What are you?" the biggest boy demanded.

"What are you, little man?" A harsh laugh washed over them. "You live as slaves, and you don't even know it. Your society is small and stupid, and you can't even imagine the wonders and freedoms that could be yours."

"Shut up!" their leader cried out.

"Who's doing the talking?" another asked.

"Nobody's talking," the big boy proclaimed. "It's just some stupid machine, or something."

"You're an ignorant, pathetic civilization — "

"Shut up!"

"And you are slaves."

"All right!" With that, their leader grabbed up the largest axe and approached the mirrored sphere. When he was within arm's reach, he paused for a moment, considering options. Like any natural bully, he found it best to throw out a threat to begin with. "If you don't shut up, I'll have to break you. Got it?"

There was a pause. Then they were informed, "You are nothing but three-dimensional specks, constricted and suffocating."

The boy hesitated. For the first time in his life, he turned to Manny, asking for help. "What's it talking about?"

But Manny couldn't be sure. Before he could summon any answer, the sphere added, "You are nothing nothing nothing but savage little sacks of very stupid water."

With both hands, the boy swung the axe.

Moments later, every boy but one was sprinting out of the woods. Even Manny ran. Even when he heard the wailing of the injured boy — one of the Scouts with whom he was almost friendly — he kept running for home. Manny had never felt more like a coward, and he was ashamed. The head of the shattered axe had spun past his nose, somehow missing him — for which he was thankful — and like most shameful little cowards, he told himself that from here on he would live a good decent life, if only he could just please get home now in one piece.

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* * *

As it happened, one of the great minds on Earth — at least on that particular day — was sitting in a nearby living room, enduring the company of his frail but still demanding mother.

Jonah Klast was an accomplished painter and a published poet, a concert pianist and one of the world's leading experts in trilobites. But his real fame came in those exceptionally narrow realms of string theory, cosmology, and the meanings of the universe. He was young-faced and rather handsome at thirty-one years old — part Vietnamese, part German — and to most of the world, he could be an insufferably arrogant prick. But not with his mother. Sitting on the long, soft sofa, speaking with an unusually quiet voice, he listed all of his accomplishments and the honors accrued since his last visit. This was their pattern, bearable if not pleasant. She would listen to his boasts, and then he would run out of things to say. Then they would sit for a few uncomfortable moments, saying nothing until the old woman gave a shrug and jabbed him with a needle or two.

"What about the MacArthur?" she asked.

It was a reliable needle. Jonah barely flinched, remarking, "I wouldn't know, Mother. They don't tell you if you're under consideration."

"Unlike the Nobel," she snapped.

He had been nominated, yes. On two occasions. Which was a good deal more than most of the world could claim.

"They don't appreciate you," she had to tell him. She was a tiny Vietnamese woman, pretty as a girl but now quite fat and plain. "And you don't appreciate yourself enough, either," she always told him. "That's your trouble. That and letting others steal your work."

The old woman was a conniving, cold, and manipulative taskmaster who had dragged and pushed her only child to an incredible level of accomplishment. Jonah was a prince in his world, but like most people, he found patterns formed in childhood were almost impossible to escape. This was Mother, and she would always be Mother, and even with his full intellect engaged, Jonah still wished for a little trace of praise from her.

"What's that noise?" she blurted.

A siren was sounding, followed by several more sirens.

The wailing grew louder, and his mother responded by climbing to her

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feet, shuffling to the window. "Maybe somebody's house is burning down," she said.

Jonah knew that this visit was a mistake. But his flight home wasn't until this evening, which meant another few hours enduring this annual crap-sandwich. In a moment or two, he would excuse himself to the bathroom, and he would sort through the bottles in his mother's medicine cabinet. Another minor expertise: He would hunt for conflicting prescriptions, and when necessary, he would contact his mother's various doctors, suggesting new treatments when he wasn't dressing them down for being less than good stewards of her health.

"I hope it's the Carmichaels' house," the old woman proclaimed. "I'd like to see that shack burn flat."

A wide picture window looked out over a brief backyard. Beyond the chain-link fence was a weedy pasture with a long dense stand of trees gathered around an open storm sewer. The whisper of a road wound down through the grass and stopped short of the trees. A fire truck and ambulance went down as far as they dared, and then paramedics shuffled into the woods. People seem to have emerged from every other house in the neighborhood. Several boys were standing together, talking at the same time while pointing downhill, excitedly telling their story to a fireman who didn't seem to be listening.

"I wonder what's happening," Mom said.

Jonah didn't have to be the brightest man in the world to see his opening. "Maybe I should go have a look," he offered.

"Get answers," she told him.

As he was walking out the back door, she added, "Tell them who you are, Jonah. Throw your name around!"

THE PARAMEDICS brought up the injured boy even before they stopped his bleeding. Manny was standing close to his parents, but not too close. Silently, he watched his friend being carried past. The gash was high on the right leg, deep and gruesome — messier than anything that Manny had ever seen. But the boy wasn't half as upset by the wound as he was about whatever he had been hearing during the last several minutes. "I'm not stupid," he cried out, at least twice. "That thing's telling stupid-shit

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lies." Then he looked straight at Manny, and with a small, tight voice added, "And I didn't cheat on that test. I was just looking. I didn't take your stupid answers."

The two boys sat beside each other at school. Manny had been pushed ahead two grades, but he was still and always would be the smartest kid in class.

His injured friend sobbed, screaming for his mother

Manny's folks went over to comfort the scared woman.

Quietly, the firemen and paramedics spoke among themselves, every eye on the trees.

The police arrived finally. Two male officers climbed out of the first cruiser, and after a few words with the ranking fireman, they marched through the grass and out of sight. Then a second cruiser pulled up. A woman officer spoke to the wounded boy and his mother, and then as the ambulance pulled away, she asked the firemen, "Where are these other boys?"

Manny instinctively drifted back among the growing crowd.

The officer knelt before the largest Cub Scout. "What did you see down there, son?"

"A machine," his father reported, one hand thrown protectively across his child's shoulder. "Some kind of weird-ass machine — "

"What did you see?" she repeated, staring only at the boy.

The bully fought back a sob, and with grim pleasure announced, "I hit it. Hit it hard."

"And the ax handle broke?"

"But I really smacked the bastard first. Whatever it is."

The male officers reemerged from the trees now. They seemed to be walking easily enough, nothing to worry about and few people paying attention to them. Then a murmur passed through the crowd, and everybody began to watch. One officer was leading. The other man followed several strides behind, his nose bleeding and one eye halfway swollen shut. With a low, furious voice, he said, "Screw you," every so often. "Asshole," he called up to his partner. "Screw you."

The leading officer wiped at his eyes before reaching the policewoman.

She rose and said, "What?"

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"Nothing."

"What happened?"

The first man looked back over his shoulder. "It's between him and me. And it's done now."

"Like hell," his partner muttered.

"Get yourself cleaned up," she advised the bleeding man. Then she turned to the crowd, using a tight loud voice to ask, "Can anybody tell me anything about this object? Does anyone have any ideas — ?"

A man stepped forward.

Manny hadn't noticed him before now. They were standing near each other, but he seemed to be just a stranger among the neighbors. Except that now, looking up at the face, a vague familiarity began to tug at Manny. He had seen this man somewhere. Did he live nearby? No, he didn't. Maybe he was a teacher. Which wasn't right either, and the boy was very curious now, his thoughts reaching farther and farther out into the world.

The stranger announced, "I'd like to speak to the witnesses, if I could."

"And you are?"

"Dr. Jonah Klast," he said.

Now Manny remembered. An old woman named Klast lived beside the pasture, and her son was supposedly a big somebody in California or Los Alamos or someplace wonderful like that. And suddenly Manny found the clear memory of watching the news one evening — it must have been a year ago — and a scientist with that face had talked about research he was doing into gravity and why that force was so spectacularly weak.

"I'm a physicist," the man was explaining. "I'm not sure, but this phenomenon...from what I hear...it may well be something that I can help you with...."

"Fine," the policewoman said. Then she turned to the officer who wasn't bleeding, telling him, "Help this man, if you can."

The physicist asked, "What did you see?"

The officer had a grim, low voice and a red face and big hands that kept closing up into fists, every knuckle scraped by beating his partner's cheeks and nose. He said, "Just a ball, this big. Head-high. Silver-like. Just hanging there."

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"What does the ball do?"

"Nothing," the officer grunted.

"Did you walk behind it?"

"Yeah. Well, he did."

"Your partner, you mean?"

The face grew even redder.

"It looks the same on every side?"

The officer didn't answer.

"What happened down there?" the physicist inquired.

"It talks to you."

Manny blurted those words. Trying to hear everything, he found himself standing beside the two men, and with the same breath, he added, "It calls you a stupid three-dimensional speck. Stuff like that."

The physicist stared at the ground for a moment. He seemed puzzled, and he looked as if he very much enjoyed being that way. He was confused and intrigued and smart in the face, and with nothing about this situation sensible or ordinary, he looked almost joyful. "Is that what it said to you?" he asked the officer. "The object called you a three-dimensional speck?"

"Not that, no."

"Did it say you were stupid?"

"Maybe," the voice growled.

"So that's why you beat the shit out of your partner. Is that it?"

"None of your business."

"Probably not," the physicist agreed. Then he actually laughed, turning to Manny. "Is that really what it told you? You're a three-dimensional speck?"

"And a stupid sack of water," Manny said.

"I see." A broad smile filled Klast's boyish face. Then he turned back to the officer one last time, offering, "The object said something to you. Didn't it? It must have told you something that you didn't want to know. Is that it?"

The officer forced his fists to open.

"What would make a trained officer attack his partner?" Jonah asked the question, and then he pointed at one of the fists, asking, "Does that wedding band have anything to do with this story?"

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There was no ring on the officer's hand. But Manny saw a faint streak where a ring had been, probably until just a few moments ago.

"You know, we are three-dimensional specks," Jonah remarked. "And we are stupid sacks of water, too."

"I'm not saying anything to you," the officer warned.

"Just tell me this much: When your wife and partner sleep together — is it in the past? Or does it happen sometime in the future?"

"If it already happened," the officer rumbled, "I wouldn't have used my hands. I'd have shot the s.o.b. dead!"

MUCH WAS OBVIOUS.

Jonah continued interviewing the witnesses. The mysterious phenomenon had told a paramedic that three different people died because of his blunders, and a fireman learned that he had an inoperable brain tumor, and everybody had heard their existence minimized. The Earth was a simple world full of blind souls and idiots, and there was no God, and humans couldn't be more inconsequential.

Jonah absorbed this news with an easy humor. More police were arriving, including a ranking captain. Talk to him? No, he decided. He returned to the woman officer, since he had already given his credentials to her and won a certain small trust.

"I need to see the object," he reported.

She snorted, glancing at the captain. "No way."

"Do you know what it is?"

"You do?" she snapped back at him.

"Pretty much." What was obvious to Jonah would remain opaque and bizarre to everybody else. But he tried to explain it, telling her, "This phenomenon is from a higher dimension. To it, we look like dots on a flat membrane."

"Is that so?"

"Picture yourself looking at a membrane where flat dots live," he began. "Now imagine pushing your finger through it. What do the dots see? They see a two-dimensional ring instead of a three-dimensional structure of skin and bone."

The woman looked utterly baffled.

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But the boy who had been shadowing him — a smallish kid with blond-white hair and wide green eyes — seemed to understand what he was talking about. "You mean like in Flatland," he offered.

"You know the book?" Jonah asked.

"Yes, sir. I read it twice."

This was only getting better and better. Jonah kept laughing, despite everyone else's worry and gloom. To the boy, he said, "Time."

"Yes, sir."

"To an entity from a five-dimensional realm...if it looked down at little us...it wouldn't just see us today, but it would be able to gaze back into our past and look ahead to our entire future too...."

"I guess I've heard that," the boy remarked.

Again, Jonah told the woman officer, "I need to speak with the object."

Pointblank, she said, "No."

"You don't understand...."

"We aren't sure what we're dealing with here," she snapped.

"I am sure."

"Maybe with the science," she conceded. "Yeah, maybe you're right, and this is somebody's finger. But that finger's saying some awful things, from what I can tell."

Jonah considered options. If he started walking through the grass, they would almost surely stop him. If he ran, he might beat the police to the site, but he wouldn't have enough time to accomplish anything worthwhile. And how long would the phenomenon remain here? There was no telling, so time was critical. What he needed was to get down into those woods without anybody being aware of it. Meanwhile, the police would cordon off the area and sit back, waiting for government officials to come in and drag things out even further.

If he could get in there now, he would have plenty of time alone with it.

"All right," he told the officer. "I'll just stand back here and wait."

"Not here," she said. Then to the entire crowd, she said, "Folks. For your own safety, we need you to go back to your homes, or at least back up to the street. The situation is entirely under control, but we need to bring in equipment and people."

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Jonah looked at the boy, and he smiled, kneeling to put his face close to him. The boy was a little chunky and plain-faced, with big ears ready to catch any breeze. "What's your name, son?"

"Manny Carmichael."

"Manny," he repeated with a fond sound. "You know a little something about what I'm talking about. Don't you?"

"I think so."

"This is a very important moment. Do you see that?"

"Yes, sir."

"These hyperdimensional phenomena don't appear just every day, now do they?"

"I guess not," he squeaked.

"They don't," Jonah promised. "In fact, if they ever have popped into existence before now, nobody would have had the capacity to truly understand them. Not in any substantial, meaningful way."

The boy seemed to halfway understand his little speech.

"Manny," said Jonah. "This is what I do for a living. Really, I'm the best in the world at this kind of thinking. And right now, I'm probably at the height of my intellectual powers. Maybe this very day, I am."

"Really?" the boy muttered.

"This isn't a coincidence," Jonah professed. "Somebody knows what they are doing. And what they're doing is interfacing with our world at that first critical moment when one of us is able to appreciate their full message. Whatever that happens to be."

Manny looked down at the trees.

"You live here, do you?"

The boy started to point up at the houses.

Jonah took the pointing hand inside his hand, and quietly, with a conspirator's glee, he said, "I need the fastest route to the site. You know this neighborhood. I bet you know those woods. Is there someway that we can get down there without being seen?"

"The ditch," the boy blurted.

"Down in that draw, you mean?"

"From above," Manny remarked. But he didn't try to point, this time. He fell into the spirit of things, saying, "I'll have to take you."

Jonah considered that for an instant. He didn't want company, but

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what if the kid wandered back here and warned the police about his presence?

"All right, Manny," he said. "Let's go."

THE MAN wasn't dressed for this kind of walking. His shirt tore on a fat thorn when they pushed through the brush alongside Jefferson Lane, and he stumbled on the bank going down into the ditch, his right knee plastered with mud and his soft tan shoes left caked and probably stained. But he didn't complain or even hesitate. Manny would offer directions, and Dr. Klast would launch himself through whatever obstruction or hazard was presenting itself. He was a very determined man. And he was a little bit scary. When they came to the pool where the snapping turtles lived — a dirty, deep expanse of brown water surrounded by steep ground and raspberries — Jonah paused to consider the possibilities, and after a half-moment, he asked, "What's the quickest way across?" He asked it as if he were a teacher and knew the right answer. Then he winked and calmly stepped out into the tainted and smelly warm water.

Manny wouldn't. He climbed up on the bank instead, taking his time. When he finally returned to the little stream, Jonah was too far ahead to be seen, but his course was easy to follow — a string of deep footprints left behind in the goo and trash, each already filled to the brim with the filthy water.

Where they should have turned up out of the ditch, the great physicist had kept on walking.

Which was understandable, Manny decided, trying to be charitable. The man might actually be what he said he was — the smartest person in the world — but he didn't know the landmarks, and he was awfully excited, and down in this narrow deep slash of earth and thrown-away concrete, distance had its way of playing tricks.

The boy paused for a few moments, wondering what to do.

If the man were a genius, he would turn back on his own. Manny decided as much. Pulling off his T-shirt, he hung it on an obvious branch, marking the spot, and he used hands and feet, climbing up to where the ground flattened and the trees got larger and a single doomed hackberry cast its deep shadow.

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For an instant, he saw nothing.

The mysterious object must have vanished, he decided, and a surprising tickle of relief ran through him.

Then a voice called out, "So, you're back for more."

Manny crept closer.

"Thought-impoverished slime slides on the dimensionally impaired landscape." The shiny ball hadn't moved or changed shape, but the changing angle of the sun had thrown even darker shadows across it. "Thought-impoverished slime pauses now, scared enough to shit its little britches."

Manny gasped and then whispered, "You can see me?"

"I see everything," the voice replied. "You are an ugly little vista, and I can see the whole of you."

The boy felt cold, standing in the shade without a shirt.

"Ask."

"Ask what?" the boy sputtered.

"Anything," the voice promised.

"Okay." He meant to think hard, coming up with some fat sweet question about huge matters. But without really intending it, Manny blurted, "Why are you here? This place, and now?"

"But you know why."

"No." He shook his head. "I don't have any idea — "

"But I see that you know," the voice interrupted. "And why should I bother to explain what is so fucking obvious?"

Manny took a moment. Then he carefully observed, "You're a rude shit."

Silence.

"And I don't trust you," he continued.

Again, silence.

Manny stared at the scene for a long while. He was thinking, and he was watching himself thinking. It was as if he had two minds, one working at the problem while the other waited above, ready to help the first mind whenever it took a wrong turn.

"You could appear anywhere, anytime," he muttered. "But you picked this moment, now. Here. He thinks you came for him, but if you can go anywhere, why didn't you...?"

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Manny's voice fell away.

He looked at the girdled hackberry and the assorted tools left on the ground around it. The shattered handle of the ax was still there, and its bloodied head, and something about this scene made the boy's breath quicken and his belly hurt. Without knowing quite why, he turned around. His intention was to race back down to the ditch and grab his shirt, and then he would find Dr. Klast and lead him straight up to the field where the police could throw handcuffs on the both of them, please.

He managed only half a dozen steps, and then his new friend stepped into view, saying, "There you are."

"Hello," Manny squeaked.

With a smile of relief, the physicist told him, "I got ahead of you, it seems. You should have called to me."

He handed over the T-shirt.

"That was smart of you," the man purred.

Then he looked past Manny, and a wide boyish grin blossomed on his mud-streaked face.

"Hello," he called out, stepping toward the apparition.

Which was when Manny heard the most horrible words imaginable. Quietly, almost fondly, the hyperdimensional creep said to the newcomer, "Finally. At long, long last. Someone a god might talk to. Hello!"

Mrs. Thomas Klast sat beside the picture window, watching the police and firemen standing about, doing absolutely nothing. It was a boring thing to watch, but there was nothing else for the moment. The all-news radio station had mentioned an industrial spill in the ditch, which would account for their presence. Her son had vanished along with the other gawkers. She could go outdoors and look for Jonah, of course. Wander about and call his name. But she had already twice opened her front door, and seeing her neighbors standing in a loose knot, she had backed away. She didn't like any of those people, and they scared her when she let them, which she wouldn't do now, and that was why she had returned to the window to sit in a favorite chair, watching the civil servants doing nothing to earn their pay.

Jonah must have used this spill as his excuse to escape. It wouldn't be

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the first time one of his little visits was abruptly brought to an end. Yes, he was a bright man. Even brilliant, though she would never admit as much to his face. But her son's flaws were as numerous as his strengths, and perhaps his worst flaw was an inability to confront truly stubborn problems. No, she didn't understand physics or mathematics, and except for the narrow prestige that these things offered, she didn't see the value in them. But she suspected, with reason, that Jonah's career would have been even more spectacular if he had tirelessly and fearlessly attacked the great conundrums of the universe.

He had his father's brilliance but too little of her ambition.

In the entire world, how many people had climbed half as far as she had managed to climb?

She never spoke about her own childhood. Not to her son, or anybody else. Vietnam was a place rooted in the deep past, and what happened there was gone now, and besides her dead husband, the only good thing that had come out of her youth was a fierce desire to achieve, defeating every opponent foolish enough to stand in her way.

What mother didn't love her son? Particularly when that son was born after so many childless years? But even then, love was tempered by a cold, clear vision of what was to come.

The old woman was thinking about what was to come when a figure appeared. He came walking out of the dangerous wood, and even at a distance, she recognized Jonah's shirt and his slender frame and the way that his arms swung at his side, as if helping him swim through the air.

A boy was following behind him.

What was her son doing down there? Thinking about toxic wastes bubbling on the ground, she felt a short-lived panic. Why wasn't he wearing a protective suit? And why would he even think of risking himself, if there was indeed some kind of spill?

The police ran out to meet him and the boy.

Jonah and the police spoke, everyone watching the trees. Then several officers unholstered their weapons and went to look at whatever was there, and Jonah said some last words to the boy and shook his hand before trotting toward her back fence. His clothes were a mess, but his face was what frightened her. Even at a distance, she saw his strange wide smile, and after a moment the smile became a pained expression, and after

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another moment, the pain quickly turned into a fresh and even stranger smile.

Like a small wild boy, he jumped the back fence, and then he bolted into the house, screaming, "Paper. Pens. Where are they?"

"What — ?"

"Where do you keep your pens, Mom?"

She pointed to a drawer under her phone.

Jonah took what he needed, and he sat at the dining room table, writing furiously, the rest of the world closed off from him now.

She recognized that mood. And despite her own mild curiosity and a pernicious need to be noticed, she left him alone and said nothing. Eventually the police came out of the woods and waved off the firemen. Then the pasture was empty, save for the same few boys who ran wild there on any normal day. The doorbell rang, and Mrs. Klast gave Jonah only a cursory glance before she climbed to her feet and looked through a window long enough to see a policewoman waiting on her porch.

"Yes?" she said.

The woman looked like a lesbian, but she had a pleasant voice. "May I speak to your son for a moment, ma'am?"

Mrs. Klast looked over her shoulder for a moment. "I'm sorry. He's in the bathroom right now," she lied with casual, almost artful ease. "And I think he will be there for a very long time."

"No matter," the officer said. "Just tell him that we've searched everywhere, and he's right. Whatever it was, it's gone now."

"It's gone now?"

"Thanks, ma'am. Good day."

Returning to the living room, she found Jonah finished with his work. He had filled perhaps a dozen sheets of legal paper with odd squiggles and cramped phrases. For the first time in years, she asked, "What is this stuff?"

Her son was staring at her.

"I don't understand," she admitted. Then with an exasperated sigh, she asked, "What happened down in those trees?"

"Mother," he began, "I'm going to win the Nobel Prize."

Instantly, she said, "I know that."

"Four years from now," he added.

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Which was an oddly specific guess. But she decided not to doubt him, nodding her head while saying, "That would be wonderful, yes."

Jonah rose, walking over to the wall where pictures of his father were on display. He picked up a small snapshot in a tired plastic frame, looking at the man when he was a captain in the Marine Corps. "It is amazing," he began.

After a long silence, she asked, "What is amazing?"

"How a few words, chosen carefully, can wash away all of the great mysteries in the universe."

She had no idea what to say.

Jonah set down the picture and looked at his mother with a strange mixture of awe and horror, love and bleak amusement.

Because he was unsettling her, she asked, "When will you be going?"

He didn't answer.

"You should probably leave for the airport soon," she said. "Just to make sure you aren't late for your flight."

"I can stay awhile longer," said Jonah.

Then he asked, "Does your head hurt, Mom?"

"A little bit," she mentioned. But she hadn't noticed the pain until now. "Why? Do I look like I'm in pain?"

"Not at all." Then he did something remarkably strange. Jonah bent over and kissed her on the top of her aching head, his mildest little voice telling her, "I need to stay around a couple more days."

"Why?"

"To take care of things."

"What things?"

And then he was crying for no reason, and her final thought was that her son and best hope was descending into madness.

"What is this?"

"You tell me. What does it look like?"

"A dead tree," she said warily.

"Well," Manny declared. "That's as good an answer as any."

It was a summer evening, warm and exceptionally humid. Manny had just turned twenty, while his companion was nearly thirty — a pretty graduate student who worshipped the young savant. They had come to the

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city to tour the little house where he grew up, and after walking through its empty rooms and weed-choked yard, Manny insisted on crossing the old pasture, too. The woman was nervous, even though she knew there was no genuine danger. And she was excited, perhaps even honored, though at the same time she understood how a single point in space held no true significance, just as no moment in time could be worthy of any special distinction.

Time and space were the most trivial dimensions; that was the most basic lesson drawn from the Klast Model.

"See the marks?" Her companion was fingering the dead wood. "See how the cuts work all the way around?"

She was staring past the tree.

"No," he warned her. "Touch the wood. Here. Can you feel it?"

What was she supposed to notice?

"I helped kill this tree," the young man confessed. "That's what I was doing right before the Voice spoke."

She had heard the story many times, from various sources. As an undergraduate, she attended a lecture where Doctor Klast himself spoke about that day's critical events: How he listened to the Voice and correctly interpreted what It said to him, and how that was followed by the death of his beloved mother. A few years later, Manny had told her his version of the story, although she couldn't remember him mentioning anything about killing a tree.

"It was a hackberry," he said.

She was lousy about naming trees.

"They have rather big leaves," he said, "and those leaves create plenty of deep shade."

Her fingertips danced across the long weathered gouges left behind by axes and rusty saws. But she kept staring down the slope, watching the faint whitish glimmer of what resembled a very simple wall — a milky smooth edifice that cut the Earth into a variety of pieces before reaching high into a twisted, utterly changed sky.

What might or might not be the sun would soon set.

"This is where it began," he muttered.

But it didn't begin anywhere, at least not in any fashion that a human could understand. That was as useless as saying that the Earth was where

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it began, or the visible universe, or a specific point so many millimeters from her left index finger. All positions were inadequate, since everything important happens in dimensions that humans could only dimly grasp.

"It took me years...," he began.

Then his voice fell away, and he sighed.

Finally, she looked at him. Manny was crying, his arms pulled around his chest and his young face tilted forward. Quietly, almost too quietly to hear, he said, "For fun, we murdered a tree."

"You were a child — " she began.

"For fun, somebody killed the Earth," he continued.

But that wasn't entirely true, either. Ninety percent of the planet was invisible, at least for the time being. The second Klast experiment had run wild, changing the local topology. Sure, that was true. But most calculations showed there were twelve or thirteen other pieces of the Earth, still intact but scattered across new realms, and each was alive, and perhaps in another ten generations, or a thousand, their descendents would learn how to reconnect the pieces.

"You shouldn't blame yourself," she told him.

And she meant it.

"Really," she whispered, setting her hands on his shoulders. "You didn't understand what they said to you. Klast did. And you couldn't do anything to stop any of this. I mean, whoever they were, they had all the power."

"Kids," he muttered.

"Whatever they were," she said, giving Manny a supportive hug. "They could see the perfect moment, and they had the perfect means — "

"I know all of that," he snapped.

As if bitten, she backed away.

And then he was laughing, shaking his head. Really, he was a genius, and exceptionally strange, and sometimes his games made her feel crazy. Like when he stood with his back to the dead tree — a whitened trunk now, limbless and frail — and with a sweep of the hand, he said, "Look at this ground, would you? What do you see here?"

She stared at thorny brush and several young trees. But she didn't have a clue about their species names.

"My point is...," he began.

She waited for a moment and then asked, "What's your point?"

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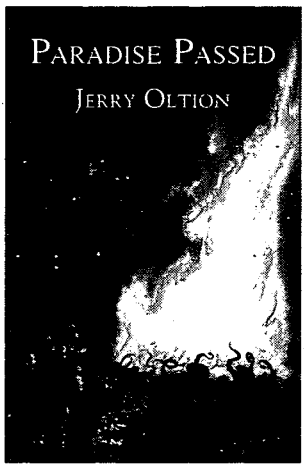

WHEN YOU PLAY WITH FIRE...

Ryan is everybody's favorite slacker. He can get along with anyone on the starship, even the fundamentalist agnostics. But when the ship reaches its destination and Ryan finds a cause to believe in, he quickly learns the price of taking a stand—especially when that stand puts alien interests ahead of human comfort.

PARADISE PASSED, by Jerry Oltion

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"This was bare ground before. And all this new growth...everything living here...it owes its existence to me...!"

She nodded, hunting for words worth saying.

Finally, in exasperation, she repeated, "You were nine years old, Manny. And you aren't responsible for any of this!"

He looked at her, a strange little smile working its way into view. And then very quietly, with a voice that couldn't sound sadder, he said, "I'm not talking about trees anymore."

She began to speak, then hesitated.

"Knowing what you know...about the universe and everything that's larger than the universe...why couldn't I be to blame...?"

"Because that's just not possible," she insisted.

"But it is possible," he snapped. "I'm standing in the super-future, sticking my finger where it doesn't belong. With a motion, I can cut this world up into so many pieces, if I want...and for good measure, I could reach inside the brain of a bitter old woman — a woman who never said a kind word to me or my family — and with the tiniest effort, I could rip open one of her essential arteries,..."

The graduate student sobbed and took a clumsy step backward.

And Manny shook his head, staring at the ground as he confessed, "I'm not smart enough to know that...not half smart enough to say that all of this isn't all because of *me*...!"

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Rod Garcia introduced us to the fantasy world of Markovy back in the August 2000 issue, and in the past years he has spun out half a dozen tales of brave knights, invisible lasses, death-dealing goddesses, and unusual romances. Here we bring you more grand adventure in Mr. Garcia's full-blooded style. You'll recognize characters in this story from "Killer of Children" (Dec. 2003) and other stories in this series, but if you haven't read one before, you should have no trouble picking things right up.

Queen of the Balts

By R. Garcia y Robertson

Bordering on the Balts are the nations of Estonia. They resemble the Balts in every way but one — women are the ruling sex. Which shows their fall, not just below freedom, but beneath even decent slavery.

— Tacitus, *Germania*

Singing Tree

PRINCESS ANNYA WENT into the autumn woods with a heavy heart, her steel ax in hand, searching amid splashes of fall color for a singing tree. At twenty, Annya was tall and blonde, strong of limb and good at games, but today she was monumentally sad, going into the woods trailed by silent ladies-in-waiting wearing funeral black. Her stepfather had fallen in battle, cut down by the Knights of the Sword, and his body had been returned to Zilvinas castle that very morning by frightened, defeated retainers. Knowing the Knights of the Sword, they would be along soon to complete their victory, looting and murdering, then converting any

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survivors to the love of Christ. Before that happened, Annya meant to see her stepfather's soul was at peace.

White birches crowded in around her, tall and slim as grown maidens crowned with leaves of gold. These young trees shooting up into the October light were not what Annya wanted. Signaling silently to her ladies, she pressed deeper into the woods, to where the tall mature trees towered over dark moist forest floor. Green gleaming moss clung to the north side of gnarled trunks, and birds called between the branches letting the woods know that they were coming. Ahead Annya saw a teenage fungus gatherer in a gay blue-red dress leading a pig on a leash. Post-pubescent virgins and trained pigs were especially adept at sniffing out truffles.

Seeing the women in black approaching, led by the Lady of Zilvinas wearing her silver and amber crown, the pig-girl dropped to her knees, asking, "How may I serve m'lady?"

Annya asked the girl, "What is your name?"

"Zenta," replied the teenager, nervous in the presence of Princess Annya, who was a Valkyrie — literally a "Chooser of the Slain" — with the power of life and death over lowly pig-girls. Maiden sacrifices were rare, but not unknown, and these were troubled times, when folks needed heaven's attention. The women's funeral black might easily be for her.

Annya bade the worried fungus gatherer rise, saying, "Fear not. We are searching for a singing tree."

Nodding happily, the teenager in the bright embroidered dress rose. "I know just the tree, my lady." Hauling her reluctant pig behind her, Zenta led them across a stream and through some thick bracken, then up a low moraine ridge topped by boulders to a centuries old oak, alive with songbirds and hung with mistletoe. Home to myriad bugs, squirrels, and birds, such royal oaks were the heart of the forest. Zenta's pig nosed about the roots, sniffing for fallen acorns.

Casting a circle, Annya had her ladies kneel and pray, thanking the tree for its food and spreading shelter, apologizing in advance for taking its wood. Then Annya climbed atop a boulder and cut a lower branch from the living tree. Birds flew at every blow, twittering overhead.

When the branch came crashing down, Annya thanked the tree again, and her ladies took up the fallen limb. As they descended the moraine,

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birds settled back into the royal oak, still crying angrily. Which was why Annya did not hear the danger coming, not until she was recrossing the stream and heard a squirrel making the man-call. She thought it might be for her, until she heard horses splashing as well. Turning to her youngest and fastest lady-in-waiting, Annya told her, "Horsemen are coming. Take a warning to the castle."

Without saying a word, the young woman let go of the limb, hiked up her black skirts and ran, disappearing into dense foliage upstream. Annya signaled the others to follow her up the stream bank, heading back the way they came. Thanks to Zenta their number was still a sacred nine, and whoever was coming would never suspect a lady-in-waiting was missing.

Horsemen caught up with them in a clearing close to the stream. Fearing it would be Knights of the Sword, Annya was surprised to see a mounted ensign in the lead, wearing half-armor and bearing the Pair-of-Doves banner of Prince Nikolas of Pzkov. Yet another of her enemies. Behind him came a half-dozen mounted spearmen from the Pzkov militia, wearing studded leather and wide excited grins, happy to have stumbled on young unarmed women. Bright blood on their spears, and dead chickens thrust in their belts, showed they had been looting and killing downstream.

Her ladies shrank back, and Zenta pulled her pig closer. Taking that as an invitation, several spearmen spurred their mounts, using their weapons to hem the women in. One seized the rope leash tied to Zenta's pig, starting a tug of war. Laughing at the pig-girl's show of resistance, two men immediately dismounted, seizing Zenta from behind, pinning her arms.

Princess Annya stepped up and told the mounted ensign, "These are my women, and under my protection."

He seemed shocked she spoke Markovite, thinking forest folk grunted like their pigs. His surcoat stank of smoke, and he leered down at her, saying, "My lady is mistaken. Both these swine belong to my men."

His men hooted, happy to have the girl and her pig. Gleefully the spearmen tore off Zenta's colorful embroidered dress, expertly pulled her linen slip up over her head, so the struggling teenager was both bare and blinded. Plainly they had done this before. Their leader applauded the performance, then turned back to her, adding, "You, on the other hand, belong to me."

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"I do?" Annya looked evenly up at him, keeping watch on Zenta out the corner of her eye. Exposed and helpless, the girl began to shake.

"Unless you hide some unfortunate blemish," declared the prince's ensign. "Strip her too. I want a look at my prize."

Unbelievable arrogance. This Markovite ensign had not even asked her name, though she was the Lady of Zilvinas and worth a mountain of squirrel skins in ransom. All he cared about was her body — a backhand compliment of sorts. Princesses seldom knew what men truly thought of them. Spearmen swung out of the saddle, eager to lay hands on her, but Annya was no scared virgin and much preferred undressing herself. Stepping closer, she smiled up at the ensign, saying, "If you want to see me naked, that is easily done."

He stayed his men, and Princess Annya took her royal time stripping, to draw attention away from the sobbing girl. Lifting off her silver crown, she handed it to a worried lady-in-waiting, followed by her amber necklace. Then Annya undid the laces on her black dress, one at a time. Spearmen leaned in their saddles to get a better look, and those on the ground stopped groping the girl.

Untying the last lace, Annya dropped her dress, stepping out in just her yellow Cathayan silk slip, embroidered with crimson flowers and brought by caravan over the Roof of the World.

Spearmen cheered, shouting, "Show us the rest. Strip 'em all."

Annya paused, pointedly ignoring the shouts, playing her audience, determined to have their total attention. Slowly crossing her arms, she grabbed the silk at her waist, drawing the slip up gradually, feeling cool fabric climb her calf. Men leaned farther forward, eager to see what pagan princesses wore beneath their Cathayan silk. In Annya's case, nothing much, just a blue butterfly tattoo.

Fabric went past her knees and up her thighs, raising chills on the way. Fall was here. Annya had not been naked before so many men since the last summer solstice. Men cheered the sight of her pubic triangle, followed by her belly button, then her breasts. She finished with a flourish, flicking her thick blond hair aside as she whipped the slip off over her head, drawing still more cheers. Handing her yellow slip to a lady-in-waiting, Annya stepped into the center of the clearing, and did a leisurely pirouette wearing nothing but her tattoo and smile.

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As she did, bowmen in skins and leather stepped out of the woods around them — but not a single Markovite noticed, happily staring at her long white body, broken only by a patch of golden hair and the blue butterfly hovering above her heart. When the ensign saw what was going on, his outnumbered men were already being disarmed. Looking about, he fumbled for his sword and demanded, "What is happening?"

"You are being taken prisoner," Annya replied, though it should have been obvious.

"I am personal ensign to Prince Nikolas of Pztov," declared the startled Markovite, as if that somehow precluded his capture.

"No, you are not." She gave her blond hair another shake, stayed his sword hand with her touch, and said, "You belong to me now."

Men in skins stepped up, seized his reins, took the sword, and shoved bent bows in his face, their black iron arrows barbed and ready. Some had green boughs about their heads and shoulders, so they could not be seen crouching in the woods. Her head huntsman knelt at her feet, gleefully doffing his leafy hat. "Your highness, we heard their cheering a hundred paces off, and snared them before they ever knew it."

Annya frowned down at her retainer in skins, saying, "Did you have to wait until I was naked?"

"Absolutely, your highness." He grinned eagerly up at her, eyes level with her crotch. "My men would not have moved a moment sooner."

"I suppose that is so," Annya sighed. "Do not harm them, especially the ensign. He is mine."

Ladies-in-waiting were impatient to dress their princess, though she now had nothing left to hide. Annya had them bring the tear-stained Zenta to her instead, and the fungus gatherer knelt before her, wearing her linen shift and clutching her pig's leash and her shredded dress. She wanted the girl to see they had both been shamed, and could both be made better. "Thank you, Zenta, for showing me the singing tree. If ever you need anything of me, come to Zilvinas on my audience day and ask."

Wiping her eyes, the pig-girl smiled up at the princess. Only then did Annya let them dress her. Then her ladies-in-waiting picked up the branch from the singing tree, and they set off for Zilvinas, winding through the woods with the protesting Markovites mounted backwards and tied to their saddles.

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Zilvinas castle stood on an island in a boggy stretch of the Daugava, connected to solid ground by an earth and stone causeway. Timber ramparts ringed a tall stone keep built by Polish masons from gray Estonian limestone, and a log boom between the castle and an outlying tower controlled traffic up and down the Daugava, the Holy Mother River that divided the forest lands in half, connecting Markovy to the Amber coast, and the Baltic beyond. Annya's stepfather had built all this, and now he lay dead in the great hall, a huge log house, its low eaves carved with serpents in honor of the keep's namesake, Zilvinas, King of the Grass Snakes.

As soon as she arrived, Annya went to kneel beside her stepfather's body, which lay in full armor on a bier of aromatic wood surrounded by burning incense. Clasped in the dead man's hands was a slim brass cylinder with curved glass at both ends, a Cathayan far-seeing tube, given to him by Lady Kore, Demi-Goddess of Death — now it was going back to its owner. She told him what had happened in the wood, rose to lay Prince Nikolas's banner on his chest when she came to that part. "Here is an enemy banner to take to the Underworld. Your foes remain my foes, and I will keep fighting them."

Annya had barely known her own father, and in the years since her mother died, her stepfather had been her parent and mentor, ruling in her name. During her minority this seemed perfectly natural, since he was the father who raised and protected her. When she became a woman, things got more complicated. She was Lady of Zilvinas, and he was Lord Regent — but only so long as Annya did not marry. Forest folk figured inheritance through the mother, so whoever Annya married was immediately Prince of Zilvinas.

Neither Annya nor her stepfather ever saw anyone they wanted in his place. Instead he kept a loose rein on her, raising Annya like a boy, free to find love without marrying. Which Annya took as permission to do as she willed, enjoying being the young and beautiful Lady of Zilvinas, breaking hearts and officiating at spring orgies.

All that was over. Her protector was dead, and Knights of the Sword would toss her into some German nunnery, or just burn her at the stake. Or she might disappear into a Markovite harem. None of which much appealed to Annya. She thought how firm her world had been scant days

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ago and thanked her stepfather. "Bless you for watching over me when I was a motherless child. I remember all you have taught me, and will try to make you proud."

In a corner of the hall, a craftsman was carving the limb from the singing tree, making a sounding board for a "kahnklis" — an ancient stringed instrument that absorbed the soul of the dead, and the sorrow of the family, turning it into a sonorous sound. She kissed her dead stepfather on the lips, then left to see to the defense of Zilvinas.

From the top of the stone keep, Annya got a sweeping view over the sea of trees, saw columns of smoke rising in the west. Knights of the Sword were burning forest villages, pushing up the Daugava from their fortress at Riga. Lucjan Jakosz, her Polish mercenary captain, was with her, wearing dented plate armor and a worried look; he had brought her stepfather's body back when her own people fled into the forest. Going down on an armored knee, her Pole-for-hire wearily explained, "We were winning. Those square-head knights are vicious, but stupid. We ambushed them at a pass between wood and water, penning them like stags in a buckstall. Their Estonian infantry scattered, and will not stop running until they get to Riga...."

"So how did my father die?" Annya asked, wishing all her enemies were headed back to Riga.

"Against my advice, Prince Zilvinas mounted up and led a counter charge. When we got to cleared ground the German knights rallied and turned on us, easily riding down our half-armed infantry." Captain Jakosz could not hide his contempt for forest folk, who went into battle wearing leather and armed with boar spears. "Your father was mortally wounded covering the retreat. Only nightfall kept us all from being taken."

More than nightfall was needed to save them now. Princess Annya bid her captain rise, saying, "So, what is to be done?"

Jakosz smiled at his blond young mistress. "My lady could come back to Krakow with me. Happily I have invested my earnings in a handsome villa that...."

Annya had heard this all before, and was not about to run off with some paid swordsman, especially a married one. "What will your wife say?"

"You mean Maria?" He acted like he had forgotten his faraway spouse

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and children — two sons and a daughter. "Why does Her Highness care? Whatever she says will be in Polish."

Captain Jakosz was smart, strong and handsome, and in her heart Princess Annya had utter contempt for Christian marriage. But she was not going to Krakow just to play the pagan whore before disapproving Poles. She wanted a man who would stand at her side and fight for her people, not someone who would pen her in a foreign harem, then turn her out when he tired of her. "Hate can be heard cold and clear, even in Polish. What is the chance your wife will welcome me with a kiss?"

Her captain replied with a sour smile. "We had better take our chances with the Knights of the Sword."

German crusaders on horseback could not hope to match the anger of a Polish hausfrau who had not seen her wandering husband for two years or more. Annya studied the smoke rising to the west. "How soon before the Knights of the Sword arrive?"

"Three, maybe four days," her captain hazarded. "We can delay them with forest traps and barricades, and by breaking down bridges at the fords. But Markovites have already come over the borders to join in the plunder, and will be here even sooner. Baron Mikhail of Karasalva is marching against us, and so is Baron Polotzk, bringing the Minsk militia...."

"And Prince Nikolas of Pztok," Annya added thoughtfully.

Captain Jakosz looked surprised. "How did my lady know?"

Princess Annya tried to sound nonchalant. "I captured one of his ensigns this morning."

"Jesus," her captain responded with a Christian oath. "That is astounding, and the only banner we have taken. How did Your Highness ever do it?"

Annya shrugged. "You will soon know all the details." Tonight the castle would talk of nothing else.

Captain Jakosz cocked an eye at her. "Sounds like a royal escapade." Being a man and a Pole, he did not hesitate to correct his princess. "Holy Mary, my lady exposes herself needlessly."

"Nonsense," Annya snorted. "Just when the need arises." She informed the impudent Pole that his audience was at an end.

For two more days her stepfather lay in his hall, ringed by burning incense, and each day Annya brought her problems to the corpse, kneeling

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and praying for guidance. Forest folk believed that the soul stayed with the body as long as it lay in state. But on the third day it was time to return his body to Lady Kore. Stripped of his armor, the Prince of Zilvinas was laid on a painted wagon, still clutching his Cathayan far-seeing tube. Dressed in funeral black, Annya had Prince Nikolas's ensign brought to her. Naked to the waist, with his hands bound behind him and a rope halter about his neck, the proud Markovite still wore his gold trousers and leather knee-high boots. He asked her, "Has my prince arrived?"

"He is on his way," Annya replied solemnly.

"Excellent," the ensign declared. "I can arrange a parlay."

"I will do that on my own." Annya did not mean for this ensign to present her case.

"His Highness will be wroth if he learns you have mistreated me," the ensign warned.

"Have we mistreated you?" Annya asked.

"Not overly much," the ensign admitted. "Food was dull, yet plentiful, while the servers were young and pretty. I have suffered worse."

"Good," Annya said, and ordered his halter tied to the rear of the painted wagon, so he could walk in her stepfather's wake. Princess Annya took her own place in the front of the painted wagon, which was drawn by cows yoked together. Her ladies-in-waiting led the funeral wagon out the castle gate, and across the long causeway, singing a slow dirge while forest folk watched in silence. All weapons and iron were locked away, all fires put out, so that the Prince of Zilvinas might depart in peace. Dragged along behind the wagon, Prince Nikolas's ensign complained woefully in Markovite, which hardly anyone understood.

On the far side of the causeway, her ladies guided the wagon along a forest track that led to a sacred lake. No forest folk dared follow the funeral wagon into the realm of death. At the lake shore Princess Annya descended from the wagon to pray. As she did, great winged shapes circled overhead, a half-dozen huge raptors slowly spiraling down from the clouds toward the lake surface. Horrified, the Markovite ensign called out to her, "What are those? Vultures? Rocs?"

Annya did not answer, being deep in her prayers. Dark shapes spiraled closer, and the ensign asked plaintively, "Are you feeding me to these vultures?"

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She finished her prayer, walked over to the funeral wagon, and took the farseeing Cathayan tube from her dead stepfather's hands. Then she turned to the terrified ensign. "They are Valkyries, not vultures."

"Dear God," the ensign pleaded, falling to his knees, "please do not give me to them."

"They are not coming for you," Annya told him curtly. "They are coming for a hero who fought to save his people." She reminded the bound and begging ensign, "You are a man who sacked three cottages, killed four men, repeatedly raped a woman and her daughter, then molested a virgin girl." Forest folk had brought in the bodies, and the ravished women, begging for vengeance. Some might add lese majesty to the list, for making a princess strip before strangers, but Annya forgave him for that, trying never to be vindictive in word or in deed.

"We were at war," the Markovite protested, as if that excused everything.

"We are still at war," she said. "I just wanted you to know why I chose you."

"Chose me? For what?"

Annya turned back to the lake shore to greet the first of the descending shadows. With a thunderous flutter of feathers, a twelve-foot-tall female roc landed between them and the lake. Riding on the back of the huge raptor was a small raven-haired woman, wearing a leather flying jacket and pink harem pants. Venom rings shone on her fingers, showing her touch was death. Annya fell to her knees before the Queen of the Valkyries, offered up the farseeing tube, and addressed her in the Old Tongue. "Hail Kore, Lady Death, Dark Daughter of the Goddess-on-Earth. Here is the magic scepter of the Princes of Zilvinas, given to them by the Allmother, that they might see better."

Lady Death took the brass tube, looked over at the kneeling Markovite, and asked, "Who is he?"

Annya rose, went to the wagon and got the banner that lay on the dead man's chest, giving the battle flag to the Dark Daughter. "He is a bannerman for Prince Nikolas of Pztok, taken with innocent blood on his hands."

"What are you saying?" demanded the ensign, who did not speak the Old Tongue, but knew they were talking about him.

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"You have chosen well," Lady Death decided, and signaled with the scepter. With another thunder of wings, a second roc swooped down, and the ensign screamed in terror. Ignoring his shriek, the giant bird seized the corpse of Prince Zilvinas from the funeral wagon and carried His Highness away in its claws, leaving the Markovite whimpering beside a painted wheel.

Lady Death handed the farseeing scepter back to Annya. "I leave it to you to choose the next Prince of Zilvinas, though it will surely be difficult."

Princess Annya gratefully accepted back the scepter. "Thank you, Dark Daughter. I will strive to choose wisely."

For a long moment the two young women looked at each other.

Lady Death was only a few years older, as dark as Annya was light, and both of them were Valkyries, choosers of the slain. Like all pagan gods, Lady Death was mortal, and would one day die herself. Trained from girlhood to be Dark Daughter, she knew how it felt to be dedicated to something beyond her. All Kore could say to Annya was, "Living is harder than dying."

Annya kissed Lady Death on the lips, saying, "Thank you for taking our prince."

Kore flew off, with the Prince of Pzkov's banner flapping in the breeze. Valkyries spiraled up after her, rising on a thermal off the dark woods, all following the roc with the corpse in her claws. Watching them go, Annya hoped the Dark Daughter came for her when she died. Only not this Dark Daughter. Her daughter perhaps, or better yet, a granddaughter.

Walking back over to the wagon, she bade her women rise, and told the ensign, "Come, we must be cleansed."

Her ladies stepped up and stripped off his trousers, which did not please the man as much as one might expect. Eyeing the frigid water warily, the ensign asked, "Would not a sauna be better?"

Saying nothing, Annya disrobed along with her women, and they rolled the wagon down to the lake, with the ensign still tied to the rear. First they washed the wagon, then the nude women gave Annya and the ensign a slow ritual washing in the frigid water, drawing more complaints from the Markovite. "Shush," she told him. "This is a sacred lake."

When they were done with the washing, two of the women tied an

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anchor stone to the halter rope, and the ensign shouted in horror, begging them to stop and calling out to God. Princess Annya and her women seized hold of the halter rope, dragging him into deeper water. Shouts turned to gasps and screams as the water went over his head. He thrashed a bit beneath the surface, kicking and splashing, but soon succumbed to the icy lake water.

Lady Death herself had approved his choice, but being a Markovite he could not appreciate the honor. At least he called on his god. Which was good, since Annya had not, and she wanted everyone in heaven to see his end — but most of all the souls of those he killed. Wading ashore, Princess Annya and her ladies dried off, dressed, prayed, then led the cow-drawn funeral wagon back to Zilvinas castle. No one looked at them as they returned, or asked where the ensign had gone.

Prince Nikolas

WITHIN THE WEEK Annya's enemies ringed her castle, an unholy alliance of Teutonic Knights out to win her people's sinful heathen souls for the Pope, and Markovite boyars eager to loot what was left. Standing on the keep gatehouse, in the shadow of a catapult sighted down the causeway, Captain Jakosz introduced Princess Annya to her foes through the farseeing tube. "The knight in white with the cross on his chest, that is the Grand Master of the Knights of the Sword."

"Seems somewhat wide for the saddle," Annya observed, peering through the Cathayan tube. She had it focused on a knot of nobles who had come up the causeway as far as the first drawbridge to view the castle defenses.

"Fighting monks do run to fat," Jakosz admitted. "Comes of having naught to do on winter evenings but eat, drink, and thump the choir boys. Women are what makes a man miss meals."

Loyalty to Princes Annya already had Captain Jakosz living on salt fish and acorn meal. She shifted the glass, asked, "Who is the tall, good-looking one with the birds on his chest?"

Jakosz did not bother to look. "That would be Prince Nikolas of Pzkov, and the birds are his twin doves. You met his ensign earlier."

She had last seen the doves on the prince's banner, being borne away

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by Lady Death. She shifted the spyglass again. "What about the shifty-looking boyar with the straggly beard?"

"Sounds like Baron Karaslava. Must m'lady judge her enemies just by their looks?" His tone implied that women must take war more seriously.

"How am I to judge them?" she asked tartly. "By their deplorable deeds? By the Cross of Christ on their shields? Or the birds of peace on their armor?"

Captain Jakosz admitted that looks were as good as anything at this point. "So the white-bearded gaffer on a bad horse would be Baron Polotsk...."

"And the slovenly fellow next to him?" Annya asked. "Dressed like a used dung salesman?"

"Boris Gaboyedov of the Minsk militia."

Arrayed behind the leaders were their men, crusading knights bearing blood-red crosses, backed by sullen Estonian infantry dressed in animal skins, and carrying spears and axes. The Markovite militia looked little happier in rusty mail and wet leather, armed with long pikes, not the ideal weapon for forest fighting. Catholics and Markovites had been under mutual writs of excommunication since the Dark Ages, but could still take time out of their holy feud to abuse the forest folk. Christians did not scare Annya half so much as the boyar's Kazak bodyguards, skilled horse archers, far deadlier than mounted monks or homesick militia. She hoped they would not be at their best in the woods.

"Shall I give them your regards?" Jakosz asked. She nodded, telling the Pole to do his worst. Captain Jakosz had spent his spare time sighting the counter-weighted catapult, which was set to land liquid-filled pots of uniform size just beyond the far drawbridge. He gave a wave and the catapult fired, sending a pot filled with naptha and an igniter sailing toward the knot of nobles at the end of the bridge.

Princess Annya watched their reactions through the farseeing tube. Prince Nikolas of Pzkov saw the missile coming, shouting an alarm and spurring his mount. Baron Karaslava shied back in horror, running afoul of the militia spearmen behind him. Old Baron Polotsk sat in frozen terror, watching the pot fall toward them, while the Grand Master of the Sword did not speak Markovite and could not tell what was happening. The surprised German was still looking wildly about when the pot hit.

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Impact shattered the pot, splashing flaming liquid in all directions. Horses reared and riders went flying, arms flailing and surcoats on fire. Prince Nikolas escaped the worst of it, riding straight off the open drawbridge, plunging on horseback into the river. Baron Karaslava ended up in the water as well, thrown clear of the saddle and tumbling down the bank into the bog. Knights of the Sword leaped on their Grand Master, rolling his armored body in the dirt to put out the flames.

Thoroughly pleased with his aim, Captain Jakosz sent another fire-pot sailing after the first, followed by a third and a fourth. All of them landed within a few paces of each other, turning the far end of the causeway into an inferno and scattering the surviving attackers. Most made their way quickly to the mainland, except for Prince Nikolas, clinging to his foundering mount, while the current carried them toward the main channel. "Seize him," Captain Jakosz shouted, forgetting he was not actually in command, carried away by the chance to grab a prince. "Get him when he hits the boom."

Men with nets were already on the log boom, not needing a Pole to tell them their business. How many fishermen got to snag a Markovite prince? But at the last moment, Prince Nikolas managed to seize a passing snag, and pull his armored body to safety. Seeing him get away, Princess Annya rose on her toes, shouting, "Save the horse!"

Prince Nikolas's horse, a big brick-red Brabant stallion, was being swept sideways toward the boom. Having missed the prince, the men redoubled their efforts and managed to catch the splashing stallion, hauling the terrified struggling horse up onto the log boom. Cheers erupted from the ramparts, and men set out in skin boats from the castle end of the causeway, hoping to catch the prince as well.

But Prince Nikolas of Pzkov saw the skin boats coming. He stripped off his mail armor and leaped from the snag, swimming away before the boats arrived. Arrows from the skin boats hit the river around him. Through the spyglass, Annya saw him make the shore, proving Prince Nikolas was strong as well as agile, and no easy man to drown. It was unfortunate that he got away. Of all her enemies, Prince Nikolas was the one she would most like to get her hands on. At least she had his horse.

She examined the wet, frightened charger in the main bailey, finding him a horse fit for a prince, with big powerful quarters, a deep strong body,

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and a bright brick-red color. Brabants were descended from the ancient forest horses of Europe (*Equus silvaticus*), the massive mounts that impressed Caesar during his conquest of Gaul. She saw that the stallion was thoroughly dried, then calmed him down as best she could with warm praise and a bunch of carrots. Captain Jakosz helped her tame her new mount, immensely proud of his pyrotechnics which required exactly sighting the catapult and taking numerous practice shots. "Pity we missed the prince. That was bound to be our best shot at him."

Too true. No one was going to gather at the end of the causeway again just to gawk. Princess Annya used the privacy to get acquainted with her new stallion, which she named Tartar. Turning the inner ward into a maidan, she exercised her new mount, getting him used to her, and handfeeding him treats. Captain Jakosz thought it an extravagance. "Horses are not much good in a siege. We will just end up eating them."

"Then we will want them fat as possible," she pointed out, feeding Tartar a sweet beet, pleased to have made a friend.

Knights of the Sword soon cut the castle's supply line, rowing barges up the Daugava, with wet hide barricades in the bow to keep off flaming naptha. Archers firing from behind the soaked hides cleared the log boom of defenders. Annya watched from the keep ramparts, wearing plate armor to protect her from stray arrows. Her suit came off a dead Pole, a young mercenary who died of gangrene. Despite being cut down to fit her, the armor was confining, and clearly not made for a woman. But Annya had to get used to it, since even the castle ramparts were no longer safe. Soon it would be wear armor, or live underground.

With her visor up, she saw row barges grapple the boom, letting Knights of the Sword clamber onto the logs, covered by the archers. Catapults sighted on the boom, kept the knights away from the castle, but that was not their objective. Dragging ladders onto the logs, the knights prepared to storm the small outlying tower anchoring the far end of the boom. Cut off from the castle, the bowmen in the tiny tower flung fire pots at their attackers, but had no hope of holding off heavily armed knights, backed by archers in the barges. Annya held her breath, seeing the first ladder put against the tower, and watching the knights start climbing up. She told Captain Jakosz, "Signal the tower."

"With pleasure." Lifting his steel-gauntleted hand, the Pole had one

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of his men wave a crimson flag, getting an answering wave from the tower. When the flags went down, men in the castle and tower released each end of the log-boom. Ladders tumbled into the Daugava, taking men-at-arms with them, and two score Knights of the Sword found themselves floating downriver on the liberated boom. Banging into barges, and partly afire, the log barrier picked up speed while starting to unravel, losing logs to the current. Unable to swim, the armored knights clung to the burning boom, headed back toward Riga, with chaos in their wake.

Amusing as this was, loss of the boom meant they could no longer stop the knights from rowing upstream, cutting the castle off from the forest that supplied it. Seeing galleys and row barges go past the castle, Captain Jakosz concluded, "They will be raiding all the way up to Karaslava."

Within a day the Pole was proven right, as smoke rose from upriver hamlets. Now the siege would begin in earnest, with Zilvinas castle living off its stores, and the invaders subsisting on what they could loot and steal. Which meant Annya had to make hard decisions. Forest folk and villagers who had taken shelter in the castle were no longer safe, so skin boats ferried them across the Daugava, to seek shelter deeper in the woods. Horses and prisoners were another extravagance Zilvinas could not afford, so she called her Polish cavalry commander in for a private conference.

For the first time, Captain Jakosz got a peek at her room above the great hall, a carpeted loft, half bedroom, half aviary, filled with carved and painted birds, and real ones as well, not caged but living in little hand-painted houses, and in tidy nests in the eaves. Doves cooed among the serpent-shaped rafters, and house wrens flitted about, pooping on the Persian carpets. Annya's outfit matched the decor, a jade green silk robe embroidered with birds, snakes, and flowers. "Most amazing," the Pole said. He was dressed in parti-colored hose and a silver-trimmed jacket. "It must be like living in a tree."

"Thank you." That was the effect intended. Her maternal grandmother was actually born in a tree. "Forest folk never like being far from the woods."

Jakosz nodded as though he understood, and maybe he did. This Pole did not need to be here, since he had a villa and a wife outside Krakow. Her stepfather retained him to raise a troop of armored cavalry — but her

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stepfather was dead, and if Captain Jakosz stayed on, he would likely be paid in squirrel skins. "And now we are cut off from the woods," she reminded him. "We cannot get fodder for the horses, or spare food for prisoners."

"What does m'lady suggest?" Jakosz was leaving it up to her, not having lifted a finger to save Prince Nikolas's ensign.

She studied her Polish captain carefully. "We could solve two problems at once; if you took the horses and prisoners to Prince Nikolas."

"What do you mean?" Even crafty Captain Jakosz had not seen that coming.

"You could change sides," Annya suggested, "taking the Markovite prisoners to show your good intentions."

"Why in heaven would I do that?"

"Because Prince Nikolas would pay and feed you, much more easily than I could." Annya hated to see her strong stalwart captain go, but she could no longer keep him.

Her captain looked torn, saying, "It is not easy to serve two masters."

She stepped up to him, smiled, and took his hand. "Do not even try. Serve the man who pays you — just think well of me when you do." To make sure he did feel fondly toward her, she sealed the suggestion with a kiss.

Captain Jakosz kissed back, and, being married, he knew how to do it, drawing out the first tender moment of contact. First kisses are to be savored, especially when they may be last ones as well. When he finished, he told her, "My greatest regret on leaving your employ is never getting to see m'lady naked."

"You should have come to the spring orgies." She leaned lightly against him, letting him feel some of what he missed. "Or to solstice eve."

"M'lady forgets, I am Christian." His hands slid inside her silk robe, starting to do ungodly things to her pagan body. "And a married one too."

Apparently Christian marriage was not as binding as the priests pretended. Thank goodness. "What a dreary religion." She pressed herself harder against him, feeling his fingertips descending her thigh. "Everything fun seems to be a sin."

He admitted it was so. "No human sacrifice. No fertility rites. Not even divorce. Hardly any sex."

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"Until you get to heaven?" So far as Annya could see, heaven was what kept Christianity going — an eternity of orgiastic bliss made up for the religion's failures and shortcomings here on Earth.

"No, that is the Muslims. Christians cannot have sex in heaven." His hand pushed between her thighs, fingers finding the perfect spot. "So we must do it here."

Annya was scandalized, closing her thighs on his hand, drawing the fingers in deeper. "That is what comes of praying to an impotent Pope."

"Celibate," Captain Jakosz protested, "not impotent." Whatever the word was, this Pole did not have that problem, feeling stiff and strong along her bare thigh. "And we do not pray to him." Jakosz added, correcting a common misconception among pagans and Markovites.

"Maybe not, yet you still put far too much faith in the notions of a silly old man who has forgotten what a woman even feels like." If he ever knew.

"Undoubtedly true." Her Christian captain was finding it devilish hard to heed the Pope's opinions, with a half-naked pagan princess squirming in his arms. Marriage vows were a mere memory.

Shrugging off the rest of her robe, she told him, "Tomorrow we will be enemies, so let us spend one last night as friends."

Her former employee pressed her down onto the bed, climbing eagerly atop her. Severance pay was seldom so sweet. Captain Jakosz was getting a free evening with a beautiful young princess, and no worries about the morrow, since Annya knew herself well enough to pick a night when she would not conceive. Her only child was a son who had died before he was two, and she did not have the heart to make another yet. She just wanted to say good-bye to a brave and stalwart Pole, who would have eaten his own horses rather than give her to her foes. Her body was all she had left to reward him with. Plus she wanted her captain from Krakow to take fond memories of her into the enemy camp.

On the morrow they awoke to bird song, and Captain Jakosz asked her lovingly, "Do you still want me to leave?"

"Absolutely." Not awfully flattering, but the truth. If he stayed it would be a losing battle. She would not have him at her side just to see him eat horsemeat, then die defending her. "That way you at least can be safe."

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He kissed the curve of her throat, reminding her, "It is not too late to come with me to Krakow."

"So your wife can serve us breakfast in the sheets?" She would take her chances with the Knights of the Sword. But she gave him a bird to remember her by, a caged pigeon, saying, "When you are safely accepted in Prince Nikolas's camp, set her free and think of me."

Captain Jakosz laughed at the artless gift, just what you would expect from a forest witch. "What shall I tell Prince Nikolas about his missing ensign?"

"That is a woman's secret." Some things were not meant for Christian ears. Then he was gone, taking the captured Markovites with him, freeing two birds at one throw. Now her spearmen could hold out that much longer, eating the horses' oats and using the hay to fatten the castle's cattle.

Two days later, the pigeon returned, a good omen. Some men forget women once they have been intimate, eager to get on to the next one — but clearly not Captain Jakosz. Witness his constant attempts to drag her home to his wife. Making love bound them closer, though right now Princess Annya felt more alone than ever. Since the day her stepfather died, her captain-for-hire had been her handy sword arm, keeping his strong armored body between her and danger. Now she had to wear armor and face danger herself. Alas, naught else would do.

That night she had a groom put an empty soup bowl over her head and cut her long blonde hair, shearing off every strand that showed. Then she loaded her big Brabant charger onto a makeshift raft, along with her suit of Polish armor. Fisher folk polled them across to the south bank of the Daugava, and in the darkness before dawn Princess Annya put on her plate armor, decorated with a red and white surcoat — Polish colors. Her favorite axe hung by a strap from her saddle. Fishermen offered to help her mount, but she waved them away, knowing she had to learn to get on and off the big charger, even encased in heavy armor. Every time she shifted her weight, the armor made a horrible racket, grating on ears bred to forest stillness. Yet she had to leave the safety of the woods for the world of men, and if she did not go armored, she would be prey to the first armed man that came along. To complete her disguise Princess Annya wore a crucifix around her neck, with the nailed-up Christ resting on her armored breast.

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Riding off under the trees, she felt free for the first time in weeks. Since she was a child, the forest had been her personal playground and domain, an endless green roofed hall all her own. No longer besieged and hemmed in, with a huge charger beneath her, and her body protected by steel, Princess Annya was finally freed to act. Surely she could find a way to save Zilvinas, and get her enemies headed for home.

First she meant to go up the Daugava to Markovite territory, then cross over to the north bank, like any other Polish lance-for-hire. Before she even got to the first ford, she came on burnt-out hovels and abandoned farmsteads. Knights of the Sword had worked their way upriver, looting along the south bank, driving people deeper into the forest. From here to the Markovite Ferry, forest folk were defenseless without the Zilvinas boom to shield them. And not just forest folk either, since this far east Markovites had moved in, coming downstream from Karaslava. At mid-morning she came on the stands of stumps that bordered their settlements.

Markovites themselves appeared, a party of woodcutters wearing shapeless smocks and leather serf collars, who eyed her suspiciously, men clutching their axes, women standing motionless with wood piled on their backs. Wearing a mail coif that covered her short hair and half her face. Annya counted on passing for a beardless lad in armor, so long as she acted the part. Asking in gruff Markovite how far to the ferry, she tried to sound like a lost and irritated Pole, who it was best to humor, if only to send on his way. Naturally suspicious of any foreigners, this family did not care if she was a girl or a gelding, saying, "Two leagues past the next ford. Germans have it now, m'lord."

Most upcountry Markovites thought all Westerners were "Germans" which vastly irritated the Poles, and infuriated any French passing through. Princess Annya took it as a compliment to her disguise, and flipped the father a silver groat, which he went on his knees to get, groveling at her horse's fetlocks. She could just as easily have given them nothing, or robbed them at sword point. Serfs were not allowed any weapons beyond a knife or axe, rendering them helpless before men-at-arms. Owning even a boar spear or hunting bow could cost a serf his hand.

Shortly past noon she came on a hovel that was still smoldering, with its former owner hanging from a tree limb. At the next farmstead she

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found the knights themselves, a half-dozen lances, each knight having two mounted sergeants with him, making a score of mounted warriors wearing plate and mail, plus some Estonian scouts, forest archers from north of Riga. They had a pen full of prisoners, and were sorting through their catch, while the sergeants searched the huts, digging under dirt floors for food and valuables.

Being forest bred, the Estonians saw her first. Luckily, all they could do was report her to their masters. If she had to fool forest folk, Annya would never have tried this deception — but Knights of the Sword were another matter. She tried to remember all she could about being a Christian.

Annya knew some Polish, mostly picked up from her captain-cum-lover, and that would be enough to fool these Germans, who knew even less. Latin was their common language, and she had to dredge up phrases drummed into her by a foreign tutor — but that just made her sound like some hayseed on horseback, fumbling in a foreign tongue. Every German's image of the perfect Pole. And a pretty one at that. These were, after all, monks in armor.

Leading the knights was an Undermaster in his thirties, clean shaven, with bright blue eyes and the broken nose of a veteran jouster. He greeted her pleasantly, "Good day, young sir. What brings you to this benighted country?"

"Father, I fear I have badly lost myself in the woods." Annya knew she would do best by appealing to him as novice to priest. From what she knew of the knights' private lives, young initiates often attached themselves to senior members, who showed them the brotherhood's most private secrets. "Would you know the way to the ferry?"

"Most certainly." This Undermaster was plainly pleased with his pretty lost Pole. "My name is Brother Karlmagnus, but comrades call me Karl."

She nodded and smiled, like a compliant young Pole on the make, saying, "My name is Janik." Adding softly, "From Krakow."

Totally taken in, Brother Karl asked, "Where are you headed?"

"North of the river." She nodded toward the Daugava. "I came to convert the heathen."

He laughed at her high ambition, waved at his prisoner pen, "Here are your heathens — but you will want to wash them first."

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Prisoners stood huddled in a large pig pen, along with what remained of the pigs. Most were forest folk, women and children caught up in the knight's net, destined to be baptized, then sold on the Riga slave marts. With them were Markovites taken by mistake, or because Knights of the Sword saw no difference between Markovites and forest pagans. One Markovite was a man, bruised and naked, who had plainly resisted being snatched, but now stood in silence with his shivering hands cupped over his crotch. With him were a couple of serf families, still wearing their leather collars. So long as serfs went unarmed and collared, they were supposed to be left at peace, like eunuchs or priests. Certainly they could not be sold as slaves, since they already belonged to someone, but Brother Karl considered them the pick of the pigsty, calling a blond Markovite boy over, saying, "Look at this little angel here."

Running over and bowing low, the serf boy grinned up at them, saying in Markovite, "What does His Grossness require?"

"He has such natural grace," the German rhapsodized, "to add to his musical voice. What is your name?"

"Peter," replied the boy, adding musically, "May rats mate in m'lord's skull."

"And a poetic soul," Brother Karl pointed out. "He never answers without adding some foolish little soliloquy."

"Adorable," Princess Annya agreed. Had the Undermaster known Markovite, he might have seen meaning in the poetry.

Brother Karl waved the boy away. Peter did a bobbing, grinning bow, saying, "May His Assholyness rot headfirst in a privy."

Hiking up his smock, Peter went running off, while Brother Karl admired his bare legs and boundless energy. Having her own secrets to keep, not the least of which was knowing Markovite, Princess Annya saw no reason to betray Peter to the Undermaster. Besides, she too found the boy cute.

When the looting was done, sergeants fired the huts, and the pigs and prisoners were driven from the pen, marched toward the ferry. Forest folk eyed the trees enviously, wanting to vanish into the greenery — but those who could run off were already gone. Those left were women with children, unlikely to outrun men on horseback. More accustomed to obedience, Markovites trudged head down, their gaze fixed on the road,

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except for Peter, who strutted happily along, basking in the Undermaster's favor.

At the stump field surrounding the Markovite Ferry, the prisoners were separated from their pigs, then herded into a slave pen just upstream from the river docks. Pigs squealed and children cried, rightly fearing what was coming. Once separated, the swine would be slaughtered, while the children were destined for the slave mart at Riga. Pleased with his catch, Brother Karl invited Princess Annya to enjoy pork dinner with him, saying, "This place is safe enough. We can take off our armor and relax, before crossing over to the north bank camps."

"Capital idea," Annya declared, racking her brain for a way to dodge the invitation. She was not about to disappoint Brother Karl by showing what hid behind her breastplate. "First I must water my horse, and see about the ferry."

"No need to be in a hurry. The ferry and camps will be there on the morrow." Brother Karl plainly hated to see her go bounding off. "Foragers get the first pick. Here there is fresh fat pig to eat, all you will find in the besieging camps is thin soup and swamp fever."

Buoyed by that bit of happy news, Princess Annya promised to be back for her piece of fat pig. Then she went clanking down to the river, giving her horse a drink while she took a look at the ferry, finding it still in Markovite hands, with serfs working the poles for new masters. There were two big flat-bottomed barges, but one was laid up for repairs. Other than that there were just a couple of river skiffs tied up at the dock, while the formerly prosperous hamlet on the far bank looked deserted. Traffic on the upper river vanished once the Knights of the Sword broke through the Zilvinas boom.

If she was going to cross, it must be here — but how? Sergeants were watering the knights' horses, and she heard the squeal of a dying pig, echoed by children in the slave pen wailing for the family porker. Once the pig was swung over a blood bucket to drain, the sergeants tied up the horses and settled in to slaughter and cook the pig. Prayers were said, then wine skins went around the fire, and eventually the smell of roasted meat filled the air. When the first sizzling back ribs came off the fire, everyone relaxed, except for the Estonian scouts, sitting with bows strung, staring intently into the woods, knowing now was the time to attack.

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All they lacked was the direction. Princess Annya clanked back to where her charger was tied, and mounted up, ambling over to the slave pen. Undermaster Karl would be wondering where his young Pole had gone — soon he would know. Approaching the slave pen from upriver, she paused at the rear of the pen, speaking softly to a woman at the back, "Be ready to rush the gate."

Taken aback, the woman clearly did not know her princess, and wondered where this Pole learned to talk like a person? Another compliment to her disguise. "Warn the others," she whispered. "We are going back to the woods."

With a nod, the woman began to circulate, whispering her message. Princess Annya guided her mount around to the front of the pen and told the two sergeants on duty, "Meat is being cut, and the Undermaster says you may have as much as you can carry on a knife point. I am ordered to watch the pen."

Staring up at her, the guards hesitated, having seen this Pole flirting with their commander, but getting no formal orders. Annya added, "There is a wineskin waiting as well. Go send to the Undermaster if you do not believe me."

Straightening in the saddle, she left the choice with them. Her sword was only for show, part of the costume; she had never swung one except in play. An ax was something else. Shifting her reins to her left hand, she slid the ax strap off the saddle, slipping it around her right wrist.

"Would not harm to ask," the younger guard suggested. His companion agreed, sending the youngster running toward the fire.

While the senior sergeant watched him go, Annya let her hand slide down inside the strap, grasping the ax handle. Silently backing her horse, she got the big Brabant between the guard and the gate. Then she rose in the saddle, swinging her ax in a huge arc, bringing it crashing down on gate latch. Bolt and latch shattered under the blow. By the time the surprised guard turned to see what happened, a tidal wave of forest folk was pouring out of the slave pen.

Spurring her mount, she rode right over the startled sergeant, who was grabbed and disarmed before he could get up. "To the ferry," Princess Annya told her people, then shouted the same message in Markovite. "Get to the dock! Seize the ferry!"

Leading by example, she galloped downstream to the dock, with the

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freed slaves at her charger's heels, taking the startled ferry crew by surprise. Some of the forest folk went straight into the skiffs and vanished downriver. The rest jammed aboard the ferry along with the terrified Markovites. Princess Annya kept her armored horse and body between them and the fire, covering them as best she could. Estonians instantly raised the alarm, but the knights were dismounted, disarmed, and deep in their cups, mouths full of roast pork, and flat on their asses — poorly positioned for any counter-attack.

Before the crusaders could recover, the ferry was loaded and pulling away from the dock. Princess Annya went in last, still atop her charger, Estonian arrows clanging off her armor. Women heaved on the ferry ropes, hauling them into midstream, while the Markovite ferry crew frantically worked the poles. Arrows fell among them, producing screams and curses. People poled harder, desperate to get out of arrow range. Children hid under her horse, and cute little Peter clung to her armored hip.

Princess Annya drew her sword for the first time, slashing at the taut ferry rope. An arrow buried itself in her saddle. Sawing furiously, she severed the rope.

Freed of the south bank, the ferry swung out into the broad strong current. Still tethered to the north bank, the ferry was carried away by the swift flowing river, finally striking the far bank well downriver and out of arrow range. Scrambling ashore, the Markovite crew managed to lash the barge to the bank.

Forest folk disembarked in leaps and bounds, disappearing into the trees. Doing a rattling dismount, Princess Annya led her Brabant charger ashore, assisted by young Peter, who laughed uproariously, saying, "Hideously splendid. I knew you were too smart to be a Pole. You understood everything I said to that holy whoremaster. I could tell by your eyes!"

Safe on the north bank of the Daugava, the boy held tight to her horse's reins, smiling happily up at her. Had she told him she was a princess, Peter could not have been more impressed.

Mating Flight

Annya hoped it would take at least a day for the Knights of the Sword to restore the ferry, since most of their boats and row barges were upriver,

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raiding along the south bank toward Karaslava. She asked Peter the distance to the besieging camps, and the boy replied, "Two days or so, your majesty, depending on if you are ahorsed, or afoot. Even longer if you are lame, or carrying a load."

"Can you show me?" she asked, aiming to make the best time possible. Peter nodded eagerly, already acting as her squire. "Then do so," she told him. "I mean to be there before nightfall tomorrow."

"Nightfall on the morrow? Your majesty must be off at once." Peter led her down the forest road running along the north bank, headed back toward Zilvinas — but this time coming up behind the besiegers. Princess Annya asked, "How far have the Knights of the Sword been raiding on the south bank?"

"Halfway to Karaslava," Peter told her. "They have a huge slave pen near Suba on the south fork."

"Why do your people allow it?" Annya wondered aloud, not really expecting an answer.

Peter looked up at her, like his new master really was some fool of a Pole, who knew nothing about forest life. "My people cannot stop them." Markovites hereabout were mostly freeholders, allowed to own spears, bows, and mail coats, but that did not make them any match for the Knights of the Sword. "Only the princes can do that."

And they were off besieging Zilvinas, oblivious to the pillaging on the south bank. Somehow she must drive a wedge between the Knights of the Sword and the Markovite princes. Since the Time of Troubles, western Markovy had been a collection of petty princedoms and city states, owing loose allegiance to King Demitri in distant Markov — while he was alive. Now that Demitri was dead, west Markovy must fend for herself against German crusaders, slave traders, and land-hungry Swedes. Western civilization at its worst.

When Peter tired of walking, Annya had him ride pillion behind her, and they pressed on into the night, nodding in the saddle, letting the horse find the way back to his oat bag and stall in Prince Nikolas's camp. When it got too dark and cold for the horse, they took shelter in a serf hovel, where the frightened family found themselves hosting not only armed strangers, but the big warhorse as well, nearly filling the log hut. Letting their hosts lie down with the pigs, Princess Annya took the place of honor

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by the hearth. Peter eagerly helped Annya strip off her armor, marveling at the strength and workmanship. Annya left the back-and-breast for last, and as it came off Peter exclaimed, "Your majesty is a woman?"

"Afraid so." Princess Annya smiled at his surprise, spreading out her bedroll. Still wearing her arming doublet, she made a place for Peter beside her, saying, "Come, at least you will not have to worry about being buggered in the night."

He crawled happily under the blankets, nestling in next to her. Markovite boys were tyrannical with girls their age, excluding them from their games, cuffing and abusing them when they could; but they instinctively sought the comfort of women, seeing nothing shameful in the female body, that miraculous source of warmth, nourishment, and pleasure. Peter asked, "If you are neither a man, nor a Pole, who are you?"

"Someone who wishes you well." Pulling her cloak over both of them, she asked, "Where is your family?"

"My father is dead, I think." Peter sounded very matter-of-fact about his loss, but serfs were born to such suffering, with few rights and scant hope for a future. "My mother and sisters were taken south, to the slave pens near Suba."

"I will do what I can for them," Princess Annya promised, kissing him goodnight. "Go to sleep. We have much to do on the morrow."

"But why do you wear weapons and armor?" Peter asked.

"Because I am a Valkyrie, a chooser of the slain. Now go to sleep." Confident she would not choose him, Peter cuddled closer. For a while Princess Annya lay listening to his slow breathing, suddenly feeling very maternal toward this young Markovite; then she slept.

At first light, Peter was still curled next to her, with one hand inside her arming doublet, cupping the breast closest to him. Since her little son died, Annya rarely ever got to be maternal with men. Girls and young women looked up to her, seeking her advice and blessing. Males she mostly ordered about, or made love to, or on extreme occasions killed, but she hardly ever mothered them. Life among the Markovites presented opportunities as well as dangers.

Disengaging herself from the sleeping boy, she rose to pray and see to her charger, telling her hosts to stoke up the hearth and put on water for her bath. As the hovel grew hot and steamy, she stripped off her arming

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doublet and washed herself, letting the assembled Markovites see a forest princess in the flesh. When she was done, Peter and the family used her soiled, lukewarm water on themselves.

She paid the serfs with silver, which they had never seen before, owing their lord with labor services, and paying their taxes in squirrel skins. She left Peter with them as well, knowing the boy could never shut up about seeing his knight naked. Giving her charger his head, she ambled toward the camps, feeling her way. As they got closer, the horse himself picked up the pace, happily entering the home stretch. Men appeared, mainly gaunt foragers who paid her no heed, knowing they would get nothing off a heavily armed Pole. When pickets asked her business, she earnestly tapped her breastplate and replied, "Polsha," then pointed ahead. They waved her through, seeing small danger in a single rider who barely spoke Markovite.

At the camps, she let the horse lead her almost home, drawing rein when they reached the red-and-white banner marking the bivouac of Prince Nikolas's Polish mercenaries. Captain Jakosz's jaw dropped, seeing his former employer and paramour amble up aboard a stolen charger belonging to his current master. "Jesus Christ," Jakosz swore, "what is m'lady doing here? And on that horse?"

She grinned down at him. "Visiting old friends."

Jakosz rolled his eyes, and snapped an order to his squire. "Help this man down, then get his horse out of sight."

He hustled her into his quarters, a windowless log dug-out with a makeshift hearth and smoke hole. Here she doffed her helmet, and they kissed, a long lewd tongue wrestle that would have gotten her strenuously groped, were she not in full armor. When they were done, Captain Jakosz whispered, "We are at half-pay, living on bad water and horse flesh, so I hope you have not come to enlist."

She laughed and shook her blonde head. "This armor was just to get me past your pickets."

"Thank goodness." Jakosz sighed. "We have enough trouble already from your forest folk sniping at our fires. The Minsk militia refused to eat dogs and rats, and deserted en masse — but I suppose that sounds good to you."

"Oh, no!" Annya shook her head again. "I hate suffering, even among

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men and dumb beasts." Then she added slyly, "Are you not happy to see me?"

"Always delighted, m'lady." Jakosz kissed her again, even more passionately. "But having you here in camp is incredibly awkward."

He was not "having her" here in camp, awkwardly or otherwise. "Because your oath to Prince Nikolas demands you give me up to him at once?"

Jakosz nodded. "And I do not want to give you up at all."

Princess Annya grinned at the compliment. "Luckily, I very much want to meet Prince Nikolas."

"You do?" Jakosz looked instantly askance at the notion of his employers getting together.

"For a peace parley." She strove to make her intentions sound as innocent as possible. "I think he and I could come to an understanding."

"I imagine you could." Jakosz smirked at the thought, adding, "Prince Nikolas is a married man."

"As are you," Annya reminded him. "Will you help arrange a parley? Then you might really see your wife again, instead of sitting here at half-pay, dodging arrows and fouling your drinking water."

"Put it that way, and a parley does not sound so bad." Captain Jakosz took a professional view of war, being in it only for the money. "But I cannot just slip you into his tent."

And if he did, she might never get out. "Does Prince Nikolas go hunting?"

Jakosz laughed. "Only if he wants fresh meat to eat. Every day or two, I would say."

Prince Nikolas of Pzkov went hunting the morning after next, taking his boar spears, his huntsmen and dog pack, a score of beaters, and two dozen Kazak horse archers — just in case. Tall and dark-bearded, he had keen piercing eyes and a hard warrior's body, dressed in a fur-trimmed hunting jacket, cloth-of-gold leggings, and tooled leather boots. He rode a hardy gray hunter, with a black mane and tail, leading his cavalcade deep into the forest, since the stump stands around the camps had been hunted down to the moles and wood mice.

Princess Annya watched the hunt progress through her spyglass, seeing birds fleeing as the beaters attacked the boar thickets, while the

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Kazaks spread out ahead to pen in bigger game. She waited until noon when the men were spread out and the horses tired, then she headed downhill through the trees and brush, working her way between the hunters and the beaters, keeping well clear of the Kazaks. Forest folk guided her to a clearing where Prince Nikolas had dismounted over the first kill, an unfortunate roebuck that had wandered into the boar hunt. Looking up, Prince Nikolas saw a Polish man-at-arms mounted on his handsome brick red stallion. He called out to her, "Halt, there. Where did you get that horse?"

Instead of stopping, she cantered into the clearing, letting Prince Nikolas get a good look at her mount. Then she turned to go, and huntsmen bent their bows, ready to shoot. As she galloped off, Annya heard the prince yelling, "Hold your fire. He's in armor, you fools! You'll just hit my horse."

In an instant Prince Nikolas was aboard his gray hunter, crashing through the brush behind her, head down and determined to catch up. Nimbly dodging tree trunks, the prince's horse nearly caught the big Brabant, but even in plate armor, Annya weighed less than Nikolas, and her fresher mount had plenty of speed in hand. Whenever they came to a clear space where Prince Nikolas could hope to draw even, Annya would spur her mount and put distance between them, only letting his hunter catch up when they were crashing along a game trail, branches snapping in their faces, making her glad to be wearing steel.

As the chase mounted, the hunt faded behind them. Horns grew fainter and the hounds could no longer be heard. Avoiding the net thrown out by the Kazaks, Annya led her pursuer away from the river, farther into the trackless forest. They splashed through a narrow ford between wood and water, a favorite spot for forest ambushes, where no Kazak or huntsman would voluntarily pass. In the next clearing she reined in, confident they would not be disturbed.

Prince Nikolas came bursting out of the thicket, and reined in when he saw her waiting, pointing a boar spear at her mount. "Is that my horse?"

She laughed at his out-of-breath earnestness. "Not anymore."

Aghast at her impudence, Prince Nikolas was not the least afraid to confront a felon in full armor, confident he could handle the situation with just a boar spear. "Who do you think you are?"

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Up close, Prince Nikolas of Pzkov looked even more promising than at a distance. Here was a man she could work with, one who had the power to do what she wanted. He could ride, swim, and satisfy a woman, for he had one wife already and was not bad looking. And he was the most powerful Markovite prince west of Nordling, so all the local boyars would follow his lead. Deciding to drop pretenses and parley in earnest, she took off her helmet and hung it on her saddle bow, pushing back her mail cowl and saying, "Princess Annya, Lady of Zilvinas, at your service."

Anger turned to amazement. "I thought I had you besieged?"

"You did." She gave him her most winning smile. "But now I have you."

"You do?" He nudged his horse closer, grinning confidently, though she was in plate armor and he in leather and cloth-of-gold. "I think not. You forget that this is my horse."

As he said it he leaned forward and reached for the reins, drawing the charger to him. Her horse went willingly, obeying his master's hand. Which was good. Princess Annya liked his sureness, and the way he kept coming, chasing her down, pulling her close, and declaring her his. Very flattering. Face to face, Prince Nikolas was stalwart and exciting, with none of Captain Jakosz's hesitant Catholic guilt. Markovites thought women were sinful, promiscuous creatures with the morals of a mink in heat. Princes and boyars kept their wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers locked away from temptation, and were free to pad their harems with attractive strangers caught running loose. Liking his catch, Nikolas patted her mount affectionately, adding, "He goes where I say."

"Where is that?" she asked archly.

"To my camp, where you will order Zilvinas to open her gates. Our camps are pestilent, and our armies impatient, so the sooner you open up, the better things will be for everyone."

"Everyone but me," Annya observed.

Smiling at her defiant attitude, Prince Nikolas took her steel-clad arm, saying, "Come, it will not be so bad. I will see no harm comes to you."

"Really?" She wished that were true.

"Of course," he replied, as if her safety were easily arranged.

"Does your 'protection' include being dragged back to your polluted camp, so I may see my fortress sacked and my people enslaved?"

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Prince Nikolas grimaced. "Alas, there m'lady has no choice."

"Not so." She shook her head sharply. "We always have a choice. I do. You do." Lady Death had taught her that.

Nikolas laughed at her insistence. "I may choose. You must do as I say."

"Say something pleasing," she suggested, "then I might do it."

"Is this pleasing?" He kissed her, and Princess Annya kissed back, determined to put everything into this parlay.

When their tongues untwined, she told him, "It beats being dragged back to your diseased camp."

He shook his head at her hopeless resistance, kissing her again. As he did, archers in skins and leather stepped into the clearing, quietly taking charge of the horses, careful not to disturb their princess, who was parlaying in earnest with the Markovite. When the kiss ended, Prince Nikolas swore in astonished amazement, "What in hell! Who are these forest gnomes?"

Annya smiled, so he would not feel so bad. "These are my people. Pray forgive their shabby appearance. Not all of us can afford servants in silk and satin."

Peeling his fingers from her steel sleeve, she told the astounded Prince Nikolas, "Now, my lord, you are coming with me."

"I most certainly am not." Nikolas of Pzkov barely believed that his latest conquest had turned on him, aided by wild men in skins. He had an army camped nearby, and two score men a quick ride away, and when he began the kiss, Zilvinas was his as well....

"You are my prisoner," she explained, "so come along, unless you prefer to be dragged." Or worse.

Grinning archers loosened their lariats, ready to tie the Markovite to the tail of his own horse. Prince Nikolas decided he preferred to ride, suffering an insolent footman to take the reins and lead him into the woods. Archers followed with smirks on their faces. Prince Nikolas warned, "Your people will pay for any insult to my person, and they can ill afford more troubles."

"No threats or cross words," Annya warned. "I would hate to see you sacrificed."

"Sacrificed?" He looked at her in surprised alarm. "What do you mean?"

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"I am a Valkyrie. A chooser of the slain, just like Lady Death. All princesses of Zilvinas are." Leaning over in the saddle to comfort him, Annya patted his mailed thigh. "Do not worry. I will be as kind to you as you would be to me. Kinder even, but you must behave."

"Behave?" He looked askance at her. "How?"

"Like a man." Annya left it at that — if Prince Nikolas needed to be told how to be a man, then he would indeed be better off head down in a lake.

Winding their way farther into the forest, they crossed a line of hills by a hidden pass, then forded a long shallow lake on a secret bridge made from sunken stones. After negotiating another narrow pass, they entered a deep green valley cloaked by a thick forest canopy. Prince Nikolas quit his complaining, sensing it would do him no good, and might get him killed.

Marveling at the forest fastness instead, he asked, "Why do you need Zilvinas? You would never be found here."

"Zilvinas is our gateway to the world. This is home." She led him to the head of the valley where a huge pine thrust up through the canopy. Scarred by fire and lightning, and thicker than a house, the tree rose like a living wooden tower into the lush greenery overhead.

Annya dismounted from her stolen warhorse and happily stripped off her armor, which had served its purpose; first the leg armor, then the sleeves, gorget, and back-and-breast, leaving her in just her boots and the padded arming doublet, which had legs down to her knees. Not her favorite outfit, but Prince Nikolas clearly found it fetching.

Light as a feather without her armor, Annya doffed her boots to stand barefoot on the dark forest floor at the base of the giant tree, just as her first ancestors had done. She said a silent prayer to the tree, which had sheltered her family for generations; then she guided Prince Nikolas to a concealed doorway in the huge pine. Hidden behind the bark door were steps cut into the wood where an ancient fire had gotten past the bark armor, burning a deep cleft in the tree. Leaving the horses and men behind, she and Nikolas mounted the narrow curving stairs, which led up to a hole cut in the trunk above a broad branch in the lower canopy. Resting on the branch was a large woven basket, with a wicker door on one side. Ropes ran up from the basket, disappearing into the foliage. Princess Annya

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opened the wicker door, inviting Nikolas to join her. "Come, this will be fun."

"I very much hope so." He got in with her, using the moment alone to be familiar, feeling for her figure through the padded doublet. "You know, I am missing an ensign last seen in your custody."

Annya pulled a crimson signal cord and the basket rose up the dark rough side of the giant pine, drawn by a winch farther up. "He did not come this way."

His fingers loosened the laces on the back of her doublet. "Which way did my ensign go?"

"That is a woman's secret," she declared primly, feeling his hand go down the back of her padded knee pants.

"Like this?" he asked, a rough fingertip tracing the downward crease in her buttocks.

"Even more secret." Men had been where Prince Nikolas was headed, and lived to tell — the same could not be said of the sacred lake. By now Prince Nikolas was more concerned with how far he could get than in the fate of his missing bannerman. His hand crept farther, raising shivers as it went.

Suddenly they broke through the canopy into the sunlight, getting a dizzying view of the green-gold treetop sea, filling the narrow valley and spilling over the hills on either side. Surprised by the vast shining landscape, Prince Nikolas stopped to stare. Annya reached behind her and grabbed his hand, shoving it farther into her pants. "Keep going," she told him. "This is my favorite spot to make love. Where rocs and eagles mate."

Prince Nikolas eagerly obeyed, as they rose higher into the light, stopping at a balcony that ran all the way around the tree. Ladders led up and down to sturdy limbs topped by light catwalks. Women waiting at the rail to receive their princess applauded her amorous advent, opening the wicker gate and extracting her from the arms of Prince Nikolas, who hastened after her onto the balcony.

Laughing women led them to a little thatched bedroom shaped like a birdhouse, hanging from a limb above, with a roc's perch sticking out beneath the blue-painted door. Here the women propelled Prince Nikolas inside, while Annya stayed out on the railed balcony to change. "What do

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you think?" she asked her women, as soon as her prince was out of sight. "Will he do?"

"Handsome for a Markovite, my lady."

"With those dark eyes and cruelly curved lips."

"No need to drown this one."

She nodded. "Not yet anyway." Giggling at that, they stripped off her arming doublet, washed her limbs with warm rose water, then helped her into her flying outfit; a padded embroidered jacket over blue silk pajamas, tucked into soft glove-leather boots. Then she went to the hanging birdhouse bedroom, to put her prince to the final test.

Little birdhouses hung from the big one, and doves cooed in the eaves. Inside the room was filled by a feather bed, on which Prince Nikolas was sitting. He brightened as soon as he saw her appear in the painted doorway. "Now you look more like the Lady of Zilvinas."

Smiling at the compliment, she turned slowly to show off her flying suit. "Did you ever doubt me?"

"Doubt you?" He stared up thoughtfully from the feather bed. "I barely know what to make of you."

She arched an eyebrow. "Because I live in a birdhouse?"

"No." Prince Nikolas laughed at that notion, taking hold of her blue-silk pajama pants and slowly pulling her closer. "This birdhouse bed is the sanest thing I have seen so far."

"You should see the tree at night," she said, letting him pull her onto the bed, "when lamps and tapers burn on the balconies and birdhouses, becoming a shining string of lights climbing through the pine branches."

"Just like a giant Christmas tree?" He slid his hands inside her padded coat, pushing up her pajama top.

"A giant what?" Annya had never heard of any tree like this one.

"Another thing Catholics pray to." Prince Nikolas grinned at his beautiful captor's naivete. "You could not have found me a nicer prison."

Straddling his legs with hers, she sank down into her prisoner's lap. "I promised to be as kind to you as you would be to me."

"Kinder even." Prince Nikolas's smile widened. "This feathered nest certainly beats my stinking, pestilent camp."

"So why go back?" Princess Annya honestly could not understand why men would choose to huddle in some dismal hole, dying in droves —

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just to make war on each other. "Ally with me, and live free. Can Baron Karaslava, or the Knights of the Sword offer you any better?" To emphasize her point, she pressed her blue silk pajama bottoms into his cloth-of-gold crotch.

"You make it awfully tempting," he admitted, slipping his hands beneath her pajama top, stroking her breasts. "Yet you exaggerate what I can do. I am an elected prince, and could be recalled by the citizens of Pzkov if I go too far. Aside from the civic militia, I have only my Kazaks, and some Polish mercenaries of doubtful loyalty."

She knew just how doubtful, wondering what Captain Jakosz would think of his two warring employers making up in bed. "And the citizens of Pzkov would disapprove of allying with me?"

"My, yes." And his wife as well, but he would not let go of her breasts, running his thumbs over her stiff nipples. "You are a pagan forest witch, just about everything the Godfearing citizens are against."

"Worse than the Knights of the Sword?" she asked, with a sultry pout. "Who are taking your people as slaves."

"We have only your word for that," he reminded her, not anxious to cross the Knights of the Sword. "Though if it were true, it would sorely anger Pzkov. Any serfs being sold are some landlord's property, and no one likes innocent defenseless children being raised as Catholics."

"Then let me show you," she suggested, pushing his hands off her breasts and leaping out of his lap; there would be no more feeling her up until they settled the matter of the slave pens. "Surely you can at least look for yourself? Do you need permission for that?"

Prince Nikolas stared hard at her, wondering what in heaven he had gotten himself into, when all he meant was to go boar hunting. "I do not need permission. But we are well north of the river, and if the Knights are rampaging along the south bank, how will we even get across to see?"

"Do not worry, I will get you there today," Annya promised, giving him a lingering thank-you kiss. When their lips parted, she whispered, "To me you are a real prince."

She took him up the basket elevator to the rookery, where rocs' nests made of mud and dead branches rested in the crooks of massive limbs. Here sat another basket, attached to lines above, and resting on a launch ramp overlooking the trackless sea of treetops. Peter was waiting, having

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been brought here the day before by her personal huntsmen. Ecstatic to see her, Peter fell to his knees, throwing his arms about her legs and happily burying his head in her blue silk crotch. Princess Annya managed to pry Peter off her, turned the boy about, and introduced him to her prince. "This is Prince Nikolas of Pzkov, and he has come to see the slave pens at Suba."

Peter thanked the prince profusely, saying, "My mother and sister are there. Will you be rescuing them soon?"

Prince Nikolas looked in alarm at the huge double-triplane box kite that the basket hung from, asking, "Must this be now?"

"Unless you are willing to take this boy's word?" Annya suggested. He was the one who wanted proof. "There is a steady north wind blowing, and we do not know how long that will last."

Prince Nikolas grimaced, but agreed to go. She would have been disappointed if he had given in without seeing for himself. She did not want to win just because Prince Nikolas was afraid of flying. Or of her. The three of them crowded into the small basket, and the ground crew released the anchor, slowly unreeling the long launch cable. Carried aloft by the giant box kite, the basket rose above the green canopy, accompanied by a trio of tame rocs wearing empty pack saddles. Lines ran from the rocs' saddle harnesses to the box kite's support lines. When they reached the end of the launch cable, the towering pine looked like a twig, far below. She asked Prince Nikolas, "Are you ready to take a peek at Suba?"

Nikolas looked evenly back at her, saying, "I am even more curious to know what became of my missing ensign. Why not go looking for him?"

Observing a holy silence, Annya released the long launch cable, which swiftly fell away below them. At the same time the rocs took off, dragging them downwind, providing direction and lift, converting the huge double-triplane kite into a towed glider. Peter loved it, oohing and ahhing with a child's utter confidence that adults would not let him fall. Between bursts of excitement, he would shout questions. "What is that down there?"

"An eagle." Or a young griffhawk, hard to say at a distance.

"Why does it look so tiny?"

"Because we are very far up."

"I'll say!" Peter declared happily.

Flashes of bright water showed amid the green canopy as they neared

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the Daugava, then the broad Mother River herself appeared. Princess Annya pointed out a galley bearing the Teutonic cross of the Knights of the Sword. "See, she is anchored by the south fork tributary that leads to Suba."

"Which proves nothing." Prince Nikolas peered down at the long slim warship. "Except that the Knights are hereabouts."

"And busy." She showed Prince Nikolas how to use the spyglass, pointing out thin columns of smoke upriver. "Those fires are far inside Markovite territory."

Prince Nikolas was more interested in the spyglass, which he swore had many marvelous uses. "Look, you can see people bathing by the river."

He was going to get an even better look, since the kite was nearing the end of its long glide. Treetops drew closer, and she directed the spyglass toward two cleared circles in the canopy, on either side of the Suba tributary. "There are the slave pens."

"They look nearly empty." Prince Nikolas had been having better luck with bathers.

"Watch when we go over." There is nothing like a roc-drawn kite passing overhead to bring out folks with little to do. As they passed low over the nearer clearing, people poured out of log huts, looking up in anxious amazement. Staring down at the packed faces it was easy to pick out the stolid, drably dressed Markovites, amid the tattooed and skin-covered forest folk.

"Look!" Peter shouted, "There, that's my sister." He waved vigorously to his startled sibling, a blonde about five or so in a russet dress, yelling, "Look! Up here, stupid!"

His sister's surprised face broke into a huge grin, as the little girl recognized her brother, waving wildly back at him. Peter shouted down, "Go get mother, you silly cow!"

His sister dashed off to obey, and moments later the boy was shrieking, "Mom! Look, it is me!"

Princess Annya could not tell which woman was his mother, but it did not matter, since this was obviously the spot. She released the rocs and the kite drifted downward, headed toward the treetops beyond the cleared area. Seeing a good-sized oak below them, Annya dropped a grapple line, snagging the upper limbs. Instantly the basket jerked to a stop. Prince

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Nikolas looked aghast, asking, "What are you doing?"

"This is what we came to see." They were tethered to the top of the giant oak, on a line held taut by the big box kite catching the north wind above. She showed him a crank in the bottom of the basket, saying, "Here, wind us down."

He turned the crank, working a winch that wound them down the grapple line, until the swaying basket came to rest on an upper limb, in plain view of the slave stockades. Peter scrambled out of the basket onto an oak limb, claiming he had never been so high in a tree before. Holding tight with one hand, he waved eagerly to the slaves in the nearest stockade.

Knights of the Sword in full armor rode up to the pens, drawn by the slaves' excitement, and Princess Annya pointed the spyglass at them, asking, "Now do you believe the Knights have Markovites in those slave pens? Or must we take a closer look?"

"I am convinced," Prince Nikolas announced, already closer than he liked.

"So will you do the right thing?" Annya asked.

"What is that?" Peering down through the foliage, Prince Nikolas saw lance points below. Mounted Knights of the Sword had surrounded the tree; luckily they could not climb it.

"Marry me, and ally with Zilvinas." Annya had vowed to put her whole self into these negotiations, and it would be good for everyone if her next child had the Prince of Pzkov for a father. Her people dearly needed friendly relations with the Markovites, and what could be friendlier than making babies?

"And rescue my family!" Peter pleaded, from his perch on a nearby limb.

"I cannot rescue anyone," Prince Nikolas protested. Not even himself. Estonian spearmen had joined their German masters at the base of the tree. Mounted knights might not be much at climbing trees, but the Estonians were born in the woods.

"Yes you can." To prove it, Annya pulled out her bird whistle, and blew a long shrill blast.

As the Estonians started up the tree, the three rocs that brought them settled down atop the oak, pack saddles still harnessed to their backs, ready to take on passengers. Annya asked, "Will you go or stay?"

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Prince Nikolas looked down at the Estonians, scrambling up the oak to get him. "Do I have a choice?

"You always have a choice," Annya insisted, sliding her hands inside his hunting jacket, feeling taut muscled flesh through his silk undershirt. Captain Jakosz was every bit as strong, and just as married, but unlike the Pole, Prince Nikolas had the power to rescue her and her people. And Peter's people too. Together, forest folk and Markovites could push the Knights back to Riga if they stopped fighting each other. "Marry me, and help save these slaves. Then your militia gets to go home heroes, while you get me for an ally."

"And the Knights of the Sword for my enemies," Nikolas added ruefully.

"They were your enemies already." She kissed her prospective groom. "You just did not know it."

True-enough. He had not even wanted to know it, but there was no stopping things now. He must "marry" this forest princess or give in to murderous monks in armor. Luckily, pagan marriage was not binding beyond the forest, totally unsanctioned by the Church. Or any church, for that matter. As she helped him buckle into the roc's pack saddle, Prince Nikolas warned her, "This will not be a proper marriage."

Meaning he would not keep her locked away in his harem, with his wife, daughters, concubines, and inconvenient female relations; having her when he wished, and whipping her when she warranted it. Princess Annya pouted coyly, pulling the hand-forged buckle tight. "You make that sound like a bad thing." ☙

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FILMS

DAVID J. SKAL

SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

A GREAT many years ago, in a place far away, I spent a memorable afternoon in the company of both Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers (and, as a special bonus, Tarzan) all embodied in the person of Larry "Buster" Crabbe, the 1932 Olympic swimming gold medalist who parlayed his fame into Hollywood casting coups as some of the most famous pop culture icons of the Depression era.

It was the early 1970s, during the tumultuous cusp of Vietnam and Watergate, and, for a draft-age kid, the 1930s frankly seemed a better place to live. Ever since the Cuban missile crisis I had been escaping into the controlled, stylized world of 1930s and '40s monster movies and pulp fiction, all set against the buildup and cataclysm of World War II, which, unlike Vietnam, radiated moral certitude.

Some part of my brain was really rather hopeful that Buster Crabbe would alight from his sky ship at Port Columbus airport, coruscating with art deco halos, and maybe even brandishing a zap gun. He still looked the part, and I don't think I've ever met another man of his age in such terrific physical shape. But Buster Crabbe had long before escaped the world of B-movies, diving back into the more down-to-Earth world of swimming pool contracting. He was visiting Ohio University to do an aquatic demonstration for an annual event called "Dads' Weekend," and I was covering the event for the school paper. We stopped for lunch at a coffee shop in Lancaster, Ohio, where I was disappointed to find that Crabbe wasn't particularly nostalgic or even

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all that knowledgeable about much of his own film work. I had hoped for some anecdotes about those tin-cans-with-tailfins that stood in for rocket ships in *Flash Gordon*, or maybe some exclusive backstage dish on Ming the Merciless, but in the end I was on top of far more trivia than he was. Also, to my political dismay, he was a staunch and vocal Reagan Republican. But since he was paying for lunch, I didn't push my side of the discussion too far.

The glow of nostalgia for the 1930s often seems to burn most brightly for those who didn't actually have to live through the decade. Though a celebrity, Buster Crabbe worked in low-budget films with terrible production values, and didn't have a lot of reason to look back. My own parents never understood my fascination with the Worst Years of Their Lives, much less the war that followed.

Which brings us to Kerry Conran's much-anticipated new film, *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (Paramount), a movie totally consumed with late-Depression popular culture and the brink of war. Conran is a thirty-seven-year-old first-time filmmaker who grew up enamored with computers, comic books, and the golden age of pulp magazines and movie serials, and, through plucky persistence, managed to parlay a garage-grown computer-generated short into a seventy-million-dollar big-studio feature. The burgeoning legend of Kerry Conran appears to be superimposed over the ur-template of Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, who cooked up the very computer technology that made *Sky Captain* possible in their own garages, conquering at least a corner of the world in the process.

The central conceit of the film is a gee-whiz gimmick, namely the integration of a meticulously detailed, computer-generated world with live actors shot against blue screens on a soundstage, then laboriously composited into the finished frames.

In this alternate-universe 1939, there is no Hitler, though much fancifully displaced war buzz as a shadowy international supervillain named Totenkopf ("Death's-Head") plunders the world's resources with armies of flying, stomping robots the size of King Kong, emblazoned with Totenkopf's logo: a nifty machine-tooled, winged skull with rivets in the feathers. I haven't been to a toy store recently, but look forward to the inevitable appearance

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of mini-bot action figures of these Final Solution stand-ins.

Enter plucky and persistent newspaper reporter Polly Perkins (Gwyneth Paltrow), who has been pursuing the mystery of disappearing scientists, which leads her smack dab into the middle of Sixth Avenue, scampering amid the stomping robot feet to retrieve her camera (anachronistically undersized for newspaper use in the 1930s). She is improbably rescued by an old flame, ace fighter pilot Joe Sullivan, a.k.a. Sky Captain (Jude Law), though in this arbitrarily alternate world, it's not clear where he honed his skills. He's too young to have been a dogfighter in World War I, but there are sketchy hints of a previous international conflict where Polly's reportorial zeal landed Joe in a Manchurian prison camp. We also learn that Joe two-timed Polly with Franky Cook (Angelina Jolie), now the leather-clad, eye-patched commander of a British aircraft carrier in the clouds, with an all-female amphibious squadron at her loyal disposal. Ever since his problematic dalliances with Polly and Franky, Joe seems to have been spending most of his time hanging with a nerdy techno-wiz named Dex Dearborn (Giovanni Ribisi). But relax: any pesky homoerotic undercurrents are safely sublimated by the reliable tomboy/geek stereotypes.

At a screening of *The Wizard of Oz* at Radio City Music Hall, Polly learns from a scientist-on-the-run that the evil Totenkopf is hiding out in Shangri-La, and with Franky's help, she and Joe wing their way to an Oz-like Nepal (complete with the robotic equivalent of winged monkeys) where we learn that Totenkopf's ultimate plans for the fate of the Earth owe less to *Flash Gordon* than to *When Worlds Collide.*

Lest I appear even slightly unappreciative, let me say from the outset that *Sky Captain* is one of the biggest, juiciest pieces of eye candy likely to visit your cineplex this or any other year. The film opens with a jaw-dropping sequence of the Hindenburg III's wintry mooring at the spire of the Empire State Building, all as might be glimpsed through some rare and precious art deco snow-globe. The sequence is so ravishing that you don't wonder until later just how the passengers got from the dirigible to the building. The itsy-bitsy gangplank that opens at the blimp's bottom offers nothing except an eighty-six-story plunge to Thirty-fourth Street. But, no matter — the

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giant rock-'em-sock-'em robots are on their way, marching with the steely, big-shouldered deliberation of Joan Crawford down a Manhattan canyon, dreamily refracted through the architectural prism of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and the master-race delirium of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. Many other film classics are lovingly referenced, including *King Kong* and *Lost Horizon*, with an occasional fast-forward whiff of *Blade Runner*. Conran's army of digital artists truly ransack the attic — they clearly have a microfamiliarity with everything from the *Superman* cartoons of Max Fleischer to the paintings of Maxfield Parrish to vintage pulp-magazine covers to the techno-nightmares of H. R. Giger, and they make the most of it. Or maybe too much of it.

As a director, Conran's strengths are definitely not in the realm of people skills. The complete isolation of actors from the overall mise-en-scène inevitably lends a zombie-ish quality to the acting. To merge the performers into the digital background, their edges are softened and the actors frequently look like gauzy images lifted from hand-colored lobby cards of old. Much of the softness and murk is artistically deliberate, but I suspect it also helps cover some of the shortcomings that still remain in seamlessly integrating live action with CGI. I saw the film at the Cinerama Dome in Hollywood, one of the biggest screens around, and couldn't avoid wondering if *Sky Captain* might look better on a high-end home screen than in a theater.

But the film's greatest weakness is its lackluster dialog, which should have matched the film's visuals in snappy stylization. There are all kinds of people in Hollywood who do this sort of pastiche writing very well, and they all should have been hired. Despite his prodigious visual flair, Conran displays a tin ear for late-1930s pop and pulp diction, which was every bit as rich as the period's visual style and deserving of the same calibrated attention. Nineteen-thirty-nine also marked the publication of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, and snappy period patter had already been polished to a high Hollywood gloss. Remember all those wisecracking reporters played by Lee Tracy and Wallace Ford? Or the priceless battle-of-the-sexes banter immortalized by Phillip Barry and Preston Sturges? Their ghosts are, sadly, badly absent here.

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For quite some time now, technophiles have been hawking the idea that computers will soon be able to synthesize digital actors indistinguishable from the real thing. *Sky Captain* is the latest product of a long cultural delirium about the mechanical replacement of human life, and won't be the last. Now, however, there are signs that digital production may actually be taking a toll on real actors. Consider the Motion Picture Academy's recent snubbing of Andy Serkis for his computer-processed turn as Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*. One can only imagine what kinds of digital discrimination might face actors who engage in future hybrid productions. If *Sky Captain* is any indication, there's no need to worry about the demise of live performers, but every reason to expect actors to increasingly flatten their performances to accommodate the demands of the digital world. Even dead performers.

The digital "resurrection" of Sir Laurence Olivier as Totenkopf, a gimmick that received a huge publicity buildup, unfortunately crumbles in the execution. It's been reported that the estate of Boris Karloff was waiting in the wings as a backup had negotiations with the Olivier heirs come to naught. Karloff might have been a better bet.

With all the technical derring-do at Conran's disposal, why on Earth wasn't more care taken in the details surrounding Olivier's star turn from beyond the grave? The brief attempt at lip-synching is not good, and the editing nervously compensates by pushing in above the actor's mouth, clearly to minimize our scrutiny. Crackling, TV-style scan lines obscure details of Olivier's face, which we first see in animated form as a macrocephalic gargoyle obviously inspired by Frank Morgan's oversized false-face in *The Wizard of Oz*. Totenkopf's laboriously delayed appearance is also something of a cheat, with a final red-herring twist that only worsens matters.

Beyond the Olivier issues, the fact that a film set in New York City in 1939 using the words "The World of Tomorrow" in its title never once makes use of the 1939 World's Fair is something of an imaginative scandal. Just imagine Sky Captain hot-dogging his fighter plane against aerial robots and other menaces above and around the Trylon and Perisphere. Was Shangri-La even necessary? Happiness can usually be found in your own back yard, if you know where to look.

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As for the real actors, Gwyneth Paltrow is an alumna of the Actor's Studio, and one can only imagine where she found her motivation performing against blue screens, often without other actors, much less scenery. At least the costumes are real, and Paltrow channels the combined fashion tics of Lauren Bacall, Katharine Hepburn, and Veronica Lake, strikes fetching poses and hopes bravely for the best. Jude Law has lost some of his boyishness of late, but he remains major star material, and better eye candy than Buster Crabbe ever was. Judging from *Sky Captain*, it's not a stretch to imagine him someday taking on the cinematic mantle of James Bond. Angelina Jolie was presumably cast because of her *Lara Croft* credentials, and ultimately generates much more screen presence than either of the other headliners. The success of her performance might have more to do with her previous experience in the two-dimensional world of fashion modeling, a realm ideally suited to the graphic-novel world of *Sky Captain*. Of the three leads, Jolie alone manages the right degree of B-movie swagger, and sports a pirate-style eyepatch for added panache.

The sketchiness of the main characters, their histories, and relationships may yet be remedied. Word has it that there's a prequel in the works, in which case we can look forward to a sexier backstory and the answers to some pressing questions. For instance, just who poked out Franky's eye? Boris Karloff's Fu Manchu, maybe? (Now *there's* an idea.)

If nothing else, *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* makes it possible to enjoy shimmering art deco halos in an entertainment context. In this new age of real-world super-villains and morally dubious warfare, the only other place you're likely to experience them is in the course of a migraine.

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With only a handful of published stories to his credit, Laird Barron is building a reputation for creepy and unsettling tales such as "Old Virginia" (Feb. 2003) and "Bulldozer" (published online in SciFiction*). Hollywood scouts on the lookout for new Stephen Kings and Koji Suzukis have begun buzzing his name, and will likely continue to do so after they recover from this new tale.*

Proboscis

By Laird Barron

1.

AFTER THE DEBACLE IN British Columbia, we decided to crash the Bluegrass festival.

Not we—Cruz. Everybody else just shrugged and said yeah, whatever you say, dude. Like always. Cruz was the alpha-alpha of our motley pack.

We followed the handmade signs onto a dirt road and ended up in a muddy pasture with maybe a thousand other cars and beat-to-hell tourist buses. It was a regular extravaganza — pavilions, a massive stage, floodlights. A bit farther out, they'd built a bonfire, and Dead-Heads were writhing among the cinder-streaked shadows with pagan exuberance. The brisk air swirled heavy scents of marijuana and clove, of electricity and sex.

The amplified ukulele music was giving me a migraine. Too many people smashed together, limbs flailing in paroxysms. Too much white light followed by too much darkness. I'd gone a couple beers over my limit

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because my face was Novocain-numb and I found myself dancing with some sloe-eyed coed who'd fixed her hair in corn rows. Her shirt said MILK.

She was perhaps a bit prettier than the starlet I'd ruined my marriage with way back in the days of yore, but resembled her in a few details. What were the odds? I didn't even attempt to calculate. A drunken man cheek to cheek with a strange woman under the harvest moon was a tricky proposition.

"Lookin' for somebody, or just rubberneckin'?" The girl had to shout over the hi-fi jug band. Her breath was peppermint and whiskey.

"I lost my friends," I shouted back. A sea of bobbing heads beneath a gulf of night sky and none of them belonged to anyone I knew. Six of us had piled out of two cars and now I was alone. Last of the Mohicans.

The girl grinned and patted my cheek. "You ain't got no friends, Raybo."

I tried to ask how she came up with that, but she was squirming and pointing over my shoulder.

"My gawd, look at all those stars, will ya?"

Sure enough the stars were on parade; cold, cruel radiation bleeding across improbable distances. I was more interested in the bikers lurking near the stage and the beer garden. Creepy and mean, spoiling for trouble. I guessed Cruz and Hart would be nearby, copping the vibe, as it were.

The girl asked me what I did and I said I was an actor between jobs. Anything she'd seen? No, probably not. Then I asked her and she said something I didn't quite catch. It was either etymologist or entomologist. There was another thing, impossible to hear. She looked so serious I asked her to repeat it.

"Right through your meninges. Sorta like a siphon."

"What?" I said.

"I guess it's a delicacy. They say it don't hurt much, but I say nuts to that."

"A delicacy?"

She made a face. "I'm goin' to the garden. Want a beer?"

"No, thanks." As it was, my legs were threatening to fold. The girl smiled, a wistful imp, and kissed me briefly, chastely. She was swallowed into the masses and I didn't see her again.

After a while I staggered to the car and collapsed. Tried to call Sylvia,

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wanted to reassure her and Carly that I was okay, but my cell wouldn't cooperate. Couldn't raise my watchdog friend, Rob in L.A. He'd be going bonkers too. I might as well have been marooned on a desert island. Modern technology, my ass.

I watched the windows shift through a foggy spectrum of pink and yellow. Lulled by the monotone thrum, I slept.

Dreamt of wasp nests and wasps. And rare orchids, coronas tilted toward the awesome bulk of clouds. The flowers were a battery of organic radio telescopes receiving a sibilant communiqué just below my threshold of comprehension.

A mosquito pricked me and when I crushed it, blood ran down my finger, hung from my nail.

2.

CRUZ DROVE. He said, "I wanna see the Mima Mounds."

Hart said, "Who's Mima?" He rubbed the keloid on his beefy neck.

Bulletproof glass let in light from a blob of moon. I slumped in the tricked-out back seat, where our prisoner would've been if we'd managed to bring him home. I stared at the grille partition, the leg irons, and the doors with no handles. A crusty vein traced black tributaries on the floorboard. Someone had scratched R+G and a fanciful depiction of Ronald Reagan's penis. This was an old car. It reeked of cigarette smoke, of stale beer, of a million exhalations.

Nobody asked my opinion. I'd melted into the background smear.

The brutes were smacked out of their gourds on junk they'd picked up on the Canadian side at the festival. Hart had tossed the bag of syringes and miscellaneous garbage off a bridge before we crossed the border. That was where we'd parted ways with the other guys — Leon, Rufus, and Donnie. Donnie was the one who had gotten nicked by a stray bullet in Donkey Creek, earned himself bragging rights if nothing else. Jersey boys, the lot; they were going to take the high road home, maybe catch the rodeo in Montana.

Sunrise forged a pale seam above the distant mountains. We were

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rolling through certified boondocks, thumping across rickety wooden bridges that could've been thrown down around the Civil War. On either side of busted up two-lane blacktop were overgrown fields and hills dense with maples and poplar. Scotch broom reared on lean stalks, fire-yellow heads lolling hungrily. Scotch broom was Washington's rebuttal to kudzu. It was quietly everywhere, feeding in the cracks of the Earth.

Road signs floated nearly extinct; letters faded, or bullet-raddled, dimmed by pollen and sap. Occasionally, dirt tracks cut through high grass to farmhouses. Cars passed us head-on, but not often, and usually local rigs — camouflage-green flatbeds with winches and trailers, two-tone pickups, decrepit jeeps. Nothing with out-of-state plates. I started thinking we'd missed a turn somewhere along the line. Not that I would've broached the subject. By then I'd learned to keep my mouth shut and let nature take its course.

"Do you even know where the hell they are?" Hart said. Hart was sour about the battle royale at the wharf. He figured it would give the bean counters an excuse to waffle about the payout for Piers's capture. I suspected he was correct.

"The Mima Mounds?"

"Yeah."

"Nope." Cruz rolled down the window, squirted beechnut over his shoulder, contributing another racing streak to the paint job. He twisted the radio dial and conjured Johnny Cash confessing that he'd "shot a man in Reno just to watch him die."

"Real man'd swallow," Hart said. "Like Josey Wales."

My cell beeped and I didn't catch Cruz's rejoinder. It was Carly. She'd seen the bust on the news and was worried, had been trying to reach me. The report mentioned shots fired and a wounded person, and I said yeah, one of our guys got clipped in the ankle, but he was okay, I was okay and the whole thing was over. We'd bagged the bad guy and all was right with the world. I promised to be home in a couple of days and told her to say hi to her mom. A wave of static drowned the connection.

I hadn't mentioned that the Canadians contemplated jailing us for various legal infractions and for inciting mayhem. Her mother's blood pressure was already sky-high over what Sylvia called my "midlife

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adventure." Hard to blame her — it was my youthful "adventures" that set the torch to our unhappy marriage.

What Sylvia didn't know, couldn't know, because I lacked the grit to bare my soul at this late stage of our separation, was during the fifteen-martini lunch meeting with Hart, he'd showed me a few pictures to seal the deal. A roster of smiling teenage girls that could've been Carly's schoolmates. Hart explained in graphic detail what the bad man liked to do to these kids. Right there it became less of an adventure and more of a mini-crusade. I'd been an absentee father for fifteen years. Here was my chance to play Lancelot.

Cruz said he was hungry enough to eat the ass-end of a rhino and Hart said stop and buy breakfast at the greasy spoon coming up on the left, materializing as if by sorcery, so they pulled in and parked alongside a rusted-out Pontiac on blocks. Hart remembered to open the door for me that time. One glimpse of the diner's filthy windows and the coils of dogshit sprinkled across the unpaved lot convinced me I wasn't exactly keen on going in for the special.

But I did.

The place was stamped 1950s from the long counter with a row of shiny black swivel stools and the too-small window booths, dingy Formica peeling at the edges of the tables, to the bubble-screen TV wedged high up in a corner alcove. The TV was flickering with grainy black-and-white images of a talk show I didn't recognize and couldn't hear because the volume was turned way down. Mercifully I didn't see myself during the commercials.

I slouched at the counter and waited for the waitress to notice me. Took a while — she was busy flirting with Hart and Cruz, who'd squeezed themselves into a booth, and of course they wasted no time in regaling her with their latest exploits as hardcase bounty hunters. By now it was purely mechanical; rote bravado. They were pale as sheets and running on fumes of adrenaline and junk. Oh, how I dreaded the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours.

Their story was edited for heroic effect. My private version played a little differently.

We finally caught the desperado and his best girl in the Maple Leaf Country. After a bit of "slap and tickle," as Hart put it, we handed the

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miscreants over to the Canadians, more or less intact. Well, the Canadians more or less took possession of the pair.

The bad man was named Russell Piers, a convicted rapist and kidnapper who'd cut a nasty swath across the great Pacific Northwest and British Columbia. The girl was Penny Aldon, a runaway, an orphan, the details varied, but she wasn't important, didn't even drive; was along for the thrill, according to the reports. They fled to a river town, were loitering wharf-side, munching on a fish basket from one of six jillion Vietnamese vendors when the team descended.

Piers proved something of a Boy Scout — always prepared. He yanked a pistol from his waistband and started blazing, but one of him versus six of us only works in the movies and he went down under a swarm of blackjacks, tasers, and fists. I ran the hand-cam, got the whole jittering mess on film.

The film.

That was on my mind, sneaking around my subconscious like a night prowler. There was a moment during the scrum when a shiver of light distorted the scene, or I had a near-fainting spell, or who knows. The men on the sidewalk snapped and snarled, hyenas bringing down a wounded lion. Foam spattered the lens. I swayed, almost tumbled amid the violence. And Piers looked directly at me. Grinned at me. A big dude, even bigger than the troglodytes clinging to him, he had Cruz in a headlock, was ready to crush bones, to ravage flesh, to feast. A beast all right, with long, greasy hair, powerful hands scarred by prison tattoos, gold in his teeth. Inhuman, definitely. He wasn't a lion, though. I didn't know what kingdom he belonged to.

Somebody cold-cocked Piers behind the ear and he switched off, slumped like a mannequin that'd been bowled over by the holiday stampede.

Flutter, flutter and all was right with the world, relatively speaking. Except my bones ached and I was experiencing a not-so-mild wave of paranoia that hung on for hours. Never completely dissipated, even here in the sticks at a godforsaken hole-in-the-wall while my associates preened for an audience of one.

Cruz and Hart had starred on *Cops* and *America's Most Wanted*; they were celebrity experts. Too loud, the three of them honking and

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squawking, especially my ex-brother-in-law. Hart resembled a hog that decided to put on a dirty shirt and steel toe boots and go on its hind legs. Him being high as a kite wasn't helping. Sylvia tried to warn me; she'd known what her brother was about since they were kids knocking around on the wrong side of Des Moines.

I didn't listen. "*C'mon, Sylvie, there's a book in this. Hell, a Movie of the Week!*" Hart was on the inside of a rather seamy yet wholly marketable industry. He had a friend who had a friend who had a general idea where Mad Dog Piers was running. Money in the bank. See you in a few weeks, hold my calls.

"Watcha want, hon?" The waitress, a strapping lady with a tag spelling Victoria, poured translucent coffee into a cup that suggested the dishwasher wasn't quite up to snuff. Like all pro waitresses she pulled off this trick without looking away from my face. "I know you?" And when I politely smiled and reached for the sugar, she kept coming, frowning now as her brain began to labor. "You somebody? An actor or somethin'?"

I shrugged in defeat. "Uh, yeah. I was in a couple TV movies. Small roles. Long time ago."

Her face animated, a craggy talking tree. "Hey! You were on that comedy, one with the blind guy and his seein' eye dog. Only the guy was a con man or somethin', wasn't really blind and his dog was an alien or somethin', a robot, don't recall. Yeah, I remember you. What happened to that show?"

"Canceled." I glanced longingly through the screen door at our ugly Chevy.

"Ray does shampoo ads," Hart said. He said something to Cruz and they cracked up.

"Milk of magnesia!" Cruz said. "And 'If you suffer from erectile dysfunction, now there's an answer!'" He delivered the last in a passable radio announcer's voice, although I'd heard him do better. He was hoarse.

The sun went behind a cloud, but Victoria still wanted my autograph, just in case I made a comeback, or got killed in a sensational fashion and then my signature would be worth something. She even dragged Sven the cook out to shake my hand and he did it with the dedication of a zombie following its mistress's instructions before shambling back to whip up eggs and hash for my comrades.

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The coffee tasted like bleach.

The talk show ended and the next program opened with a still shot of a field covered by mossy hummocks and blackberry thickets. The black-and-white imagery threw me. For a moment I didn't recognize the car parked between mounds. Our boxy Chevy with the driver-side door hanging ajar, mud-encrusted plates, taillights blinking SOS.

A gray hand reached from inside, slammed the door. A hand? Or something like a hand? A B-movie prosthesis? Too blurry, too fast to be certain.

Victoria changed the channel to *All My Children*.

3.

HART DROVE.

Cruz navigated. He tilted a road map, trying to follow the dots and dashes. Victoria had drawled a convoluted set of directions to the Mima Mounds, a one-star tourist attraction about thirty miles over. Cruise on through Poger Rock and head west. Real easy drive if you took the local shortcuts and suchlike.

Not an unreasonable detour; I-5 wasn't far from the site — we could do the tourist bit and still make the Portland night scene. That was Cruz's sales pitch. Kind of funny, really. I wondered at the man's sudden fixation on geological phenomena. He was a NASCAR and *Soldier of Fortune* magazine type personality. Hart fit the profile too, for that matter. Damned world was turning upside down.

It was getting hot. Cracks in the windshield dazzled and danced.

The boys debated cattle mutilations and the inarguable complicity of the Federal government regarding the Grey Question and how the moon landing was fake and remember that flick from the 1970s, *Capricorn One*, goddamned if O.J. wasn't one of the astronauts. Freakin' hilarious.

I unpacked the camera, thumbed the playback button, and relived the Donkey Creek fracas. Penny said to me, "*Reduviidea* — any of a species of large insects that feed on the blood of prey insects and some mammals. They are considered extremely beneficial by agricultural professionals." Her voice was made of tin and lagged behind her lip movements, like a

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badly dubbed foreign film. She stood on the periphery of the action, scrawny fingers pleating the wispy fabric of a blue sundress. She was smiling. "The indices of primate emotional thresholds indicate the *[click-click]* process is traumatic. However, point oh-two percent vertebrae harvest corresponds to non-*[click-click]* purposes. As an X haplotype you are a primary source of *[click-click].* Lucky you!"

"Jesus!" I muttered and dropped the camera on the seat. *Are you talkin' to me*? I stared at too many trees while Robert De Niro did his *Taxi Driver* shtick as a low frequency monologue in the corner of my mind. Unlike De Niro, I'd never carried a gun. The guys wouldn't even loan me a taser.

"What?" Cruz said in a tone that suggested he'd almost jumped out of his skin. He glared through the partition, olive features drained to ash. Giant drops of sweat sparkled and dripped from his broad cheeks. The light wrapped his skull, halo of an angry saint. Withdrawal's something fierce, I decided.

I shook my head, waited for the magnifying glass of his displeasure to swing back to the road map. When it was safe I hit the playback button. Same scene on the view panel. This time when Penny entered the frame she pointed at me and intoned in a robust, Slavic accent, "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious is Latin for a death god of a primitive Mediterranean culture. Their civilization was buried in mudslides caused by unusual seismic activity. If you say it loud enough — " I hit the kill button. My stomach roiled with rancid coffee and incipient motion-sickness.

Third time's a charm, right? I played it back again. The entire sequence was erased. Nothing but deep-space black with jags of silvery light at the edges. In the middle, skimming by so swiftly I had to freeze things to get a clear image, was Piers with his lips nuzzling Cruz's ear, and Cruz's face was corpse-slack. And for an instant, a microsecond, the face was Hart's too; one of those three-dee poster illusions where the object changes depending on the angle. Then, more nothingness, and an odd feedback noise that faded in and out, like Gregorian monks chanting a litany in reverse.

Okay. ABC time.

I'd reviewed the footage shortly after the initial capture in Canada.

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There was nothing unusual about it. We spent a few hours at the police station answering a series of polite yet penetrating questions. I assumed our cameras would be confiscated, but the inspector simply examined our equipment in the presence of a couple suits from a legal office. Eventually the inspector handed everything back with a stern admonishment to leave dangerous criminals to the authorities. Amen to that.

Had a cop tampered with the camera, doctored it in some way? I wasn't a filmmaker, didn't know much more than point and shoot and change the batteries when the little red light started blinking. So, yeah, Horatio, it was possible someone had screwed with the recording. Was that likely? The answer was no — not unless they'd also managed to monkey with the television at the diner. More likely one of my associates had spiked the coffee with a miracle agent and I was hallucinating. Seemed out of character for those greedy bastards, even for the sake of a practical joke on their third wheel — dope was expensive and it wasn't like we were expecting a big payday.

The remaining options weren't very appealing.

My cell whined, a dentist's drill in my shirt pocket. It was Rob Fries from his patio office in Gardena. Rob was tall, bulky, pink on top and garbed according to his impression of what Miami vice cops might've worn in a bygone era, such as the '80s. Rob also had the notion he was my agent despite the fact I'd fired him ten years ago after he handed me one too many scripts for laxative testimonials. I almost broke into tears when I heard his voice on the buzzing line. "Man, am I glad you called!" I said loudly enough to elicit another scowl from Cruz.

"*Hola, compadre.* What a splash y'all made on page sixteen. '*American Yahoos Run Amok!*' goes the headline, which is a quote of the Calgary rag. Too bad the stupid bastards let our birds fly the coop. Woulda been better press if they fried 'em. Well, they don't have the death penalty, but you get the point. Even so, I see a major motion picture deal in the works. *Mucho dinero*, Ray, buddy!"

"Fly the coop? What are you talking about?"

"Uh, you haven't heard? Piers and the broad walked. Hell, they probably beat you outta town."

"You better fill me in." Indigestion was eating the lining of my esophagus.

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"Real weird story. Some schmuck from Central Casting accidentally turned 'em loose. The paperwork got misfiled or somesuch bullshit. The muckety-mucks are p.o.'d. Blows your mind, don't it?"

"Right," I said in my actor's tone. I fell back on this when my mind was in neutral but etiquette dictated a polite response. Up front, Cruz and Hart were bickering, hadn't caught my exclamation. No way was I going to illuminate them regarding this development — Christ, they'd almost certainly consider pulling a u-turn and speeding back to Canada. The home office would be calling any second now to relay the news; probably had been trying to get through for hours — Hart hated phones, usually kept his stashed in the glovebox.

There was a burst of chittery static. " — returning your call. Keep getting the answering service. You won't believe it — I was having lunch with this chick used to be one of Johnny Carson's secretaries, yeah? And she said her best friend is shacking with an exec who just frickin' adored you in *Clancy & Spot*. Frickin' adored you! I told my gal pal to pass the word you were riding along on this bounty hunter gig, see what shakes loose."

"Oh, thanks, Rob. Which exec?"

"Lemmesee — uh, Harry Buford. Remember him? He floated deals for the *Alpha Team*, some other stuff. Nice as hell. Frickin' adores you, buddy."

"Harry Buford? Looks like the Elephant Man's older, fatter brother, loves pastels and lives in Mexico half the year because he's fond of underage Chicano girls? Did an exposé piece on the evils of Hollywood, got himself blackballed? That the guy?"

"Well, yeah. But he's still got an ear to the ground. And he frickin' — "

"Adores me. Got it. Tell your girlfriend we'll all do lunch, or whatever."

"Anywhoo, how you faring with the gorillas?"

"Um, great. We're on our way to see the Mima Mounds."

"What? You on a nature study?"

"Cruz's idea."

"The Mima Mounds. Wow. Never heard of them. Burial grounds, huh?"

"Earth heaves, I guess. They've got them all over the world —

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Norway, South America, Eastern Washington — I don't know where all. I lost the brochure."

"Cool." The silence hung for a long moment. "Your buddies wanna see some, whatchyacallem — ?"

"Glacial deposits."

"They wanna look at some rocks instead of hitting a strip club? No bullshit?"

"Um, yeah."

It was easy to imagine Rob frowning at his flip-flops propped on the patio table while he stirred the ice in his rum and Coke and tried to do the math. "Have a swell time, then."

"You do me a favor?"

"Yo, bro'. Hit me."

"Go on the Net and look up 'X haplotype.' Do it right now, if you've got a minute."

"X-whatsis?"

I spelled it and said, "Call me back, okay? If I'm out of area, leave a message with the details."

"Be happy to." There was a pause as he scratched pen to pad. "Some kinda new meds, or what?"

"Or what, I think."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'm just happy the Canucks didn't make you an honorary citizen, eh. I'm dying to hear the scoop."

"I'm dying to dish it. I'm losing my signal, gotta sign off."

He said not to worry, bro', and we disconnected. I worried anyway.

4.

SURE ENOUGH, Hart's phone rang a bit later and he exploded in a stream of repetitious profanity and dented the dash with his ham hock of a fist. He was still bubbling when we pulled into Poger Rock for gas and fresh directions. Cruz, on the other hand, accepted the news of Russell Piers's "early parole" with a Zen detachment demonstrably contrary to his nature.

"Screw it. Let's drink," was his official comment.

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Poger Rock was sunk in a hollow about fifteen miles south of the state capitol in Olympia. It wasn't impressive — a dozen or so antiquated buildings moldering along the banks of a shallow creek posted with NO SHOOTING signs. Everything was peeling, rusting, or collapsing toward the center of the Earth. Only the elementary school loomed incongruously — a utopian brick and tile structure set back and slightly elevated, fresh paint glowing through the alders and dogwoods. Aliens might have landed and dedicated a monument.

Cruz filled up at a mom-and-pop gas station with the prehistoric pumps that took an eon to dribble forth their fuel. I bought some jerky and a carton of milk with a past-due expiration date to soothe my churning guts. The lady behind the counter had yellowish hair and wore a button with a fuzzy picture of a toddler in a bib. She smiled nervously as she punched keys and furiously smoked a Pall Mall. Didn't recognize me, thank God.

Cruz pushed through the door, setting off the ding-dong alarm. His gaze jumped all over the place and his chambray shirt was molded to his chest as if he'd been doused with a water hose. He crowded past me, trailing the odor of armpit funk and cheap cologne, grunted at the cashier, and shoved his credit card across the counter.

I raised my hand to block the sun when I stepped outside. Hart was leaning on the hood. "We're gonna mosey over to the bar for a couple brewskis." He coughed his smoker's cough, spat in the gravel near a broken jar of marmalade. Bees darted among the wreckage.

"What about the Mima Mounds?"

"They ain't goin' anywhere. 'Sides, it ain't time, yet."

"Time?"

Hart's narrowed eyes had gone ferret-pink and he smiled slightly. He finished his cigarette and lighted another from the smoldering butt. "Cruz says it ain't."

"Well, what does that mean? It 'ain't time'?"

"I dunno, Ray-bo. I dunno fuckall. Why'nchya ask Cruz?"

"Okay." I took a long pull of tepid milk while I considered the latest developments in what was becoming the most bizarre road trip of my life. "How are you feeling?"

"Groovy."

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"You look like hell." I could still talk to him, after a fashion, when he was separated from Cruz. And I lied, "Sylvia's worried."

"What's she worried about?"

I shrugged, let it hang. Impossible to read his face, his swollen eyes. In truth, I wasn't sure I completely recognized him, this wasted hulk swaying against the car, features glazed into gargoyle contortions.

Hart nodded wisely, suddenly illuminated regarding a great and abiding mystery of the universe. His smile returned.

I glanced back, saw Cruz's murky shadow drifting in the station-window.

"Man, what are we doing out here? We could be in Portland by three." What I wanted to say was, let's jump in the car and shag ass for California. Leave Cruz in the middle of the parking lot holding his pecker and swearing eternal vengeance for all I cared.

"Anxious to get going on your book, huh?"

"If there's a book. I'm not much of a writer. I don't even know if we'll get a movie out of this mess."

"Ain't much of an actor, either." He laughed and slapped my shoulder with an iron paw to show he was just kidding. "Hey, lemme tell ya. Did ya know Cruz studied geology at UCLA? He did. Real knowledgeable about glaciers an' rocks. All that good shit. Thought he was gonna work for the oil companies up in Alaska. Make some fat stacks. Ah, but you know how it goes, doncha, Ray-bo?"

"He graduated UCLA?" I tried not to sound astonished. It had been the University of Washington for me. The home of medicine, which wasn't my specialty, according to the proctors. Political science and drama were the last exits.

"Football scholarship. Hard hittin' safety with a nasty attitude. They fuckin' grow on trees in the ghetto."

That explained some things. I was inexplicably relieved.

Cruz emerged, cutting a plug of tobacco with his pocket knife. "C'mon, H. I'm parched." And precisely as a cowboy would unhitch his horse to ride across the street, he fired the engine and rumbled the one quarter block to Moony's Tavern and parked in a diagonal slot between a hay truck and a station wagon plastered with anti-Democrat, pro-gun bumper stickers.

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Hart asked if I planned on joining them and I replied maybe in a while, I wanted to stretch my legs. The idea of entering that sweltering cavern and bellying up to the bar with the lowlife regulars and mine own dear chums made my stomach even more unhappy.

I grabbed my valise from the car and started walking. I walked along the street, past a row of dented mailboxes, rust-red flags erect; an outboard motor repair shop with a dusty police cruiser in front; the Poger Rock Grange, which appeared abandoned because its windows were mostly boarded and where they weren't, kids had broken them with rocks and bottles, and maybe the same kids had drawn 666 and other satanic symbols on the whitewashed planks, or maybe real live Satanists did the deed; Bob's Liquor Mart, which was a corrugated shed with bars on the tiny windows; the Laundromat, full of tired women in oversized T-shirts, and screeching, dirty-faced kids racing among the machinery while an A.M. radio broadcast a Rush Limbaugh rerun; and a trailer loaded with half-rotted firewood for 75 BUCKS! I finally sat on a rickety bench under some trees near the lone stoplight, close enough to hear it clunk through its cycle.

I drew a manila envelope from the valise, spread sloppy typed police reports and disjointed photographs beside me. The breeze stirred and I used a rock for a paper weight.

A whole slew of the pictures featured Russell Piers in various poses, mostly mug shots, although a few had been snapped during more pleasant times. There was even one of him and a younger brother standing in front of the Space Needle. The remaining photos were of Piers's latest girlfriend — Penny Aldon, the girl from Allen Town. Skinny, pimply, mouthful of braces. A flower child with a suitably vacuous smirk.

Something cold and nasty turned over in me as I studied the haphazard data, the disheveled photo collection. I felt the pattern, unwholesome as damp cobwebs against my skin. Felt it, yet couldn't put a name to it, couldn't put my finger on it and my heart began pumping dangerously and I looked away, thought of Carly instead, and how I'd forgotten to call her on her seventh birthday because I was in Spain with some friends at a Lipizzaner exhibition. Except, I hadn't forgotten, I was wired for sound from a snort of primo Colombian blow and the thought of dialing that long string of international numbers was too much for my circuits.

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Ancient history, as they say. Those days of fast-living and superstar dreams belonged to another man, and he was welcome to them.

Waiting for cars to drive past so I could count them, I had an epiphany. I realized the shabby buildings were cardboard and the people milling here and there at opportune junctures were macaroni and glue. Dull blue construction paper sky and cotton ball clouds. And I wasn't really who I thought of myself as — I was an ant left over from a picnic raid, awaiting some petulant child god to put his boot down on my pathetic diorama existence.

My cell rang and an iceberg calved in my chest.

"Hey, Ray, you got any Indian in ya?" Rob asked.

I mulled that as a brand new Cadillac convertible paused at the light. A pair of yuppie tourists mildly argued about directions — a man behind the wheel in stylish wraparound shades and a polo shirt, and a woman wearing a floppy, wide-brimmed hat like the Queen Mum favored. They pretended not to notice me. The woman pointed right and they went right, leisurely, up the hill and beyond. "Comanche," I said. Next was a white econovan loaded with Asian kids. Sign on the door said THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE. It turned right and so did the one that came after. "About one thirty-second. Am I eligible for some reparation money? Did I inherit a casino?"

"Where the hell did the Comanche sneak in?"

"Great-grandma. Tough old bird. Didn't like me much. Sent me a straight razor for Christmas. I was nine."

Rob laughed. "Cra-zee. I did a search and came up with a bunch of listings for genetic research. Lemme check this...." He shuffled paper close to the receiver, cleared his throat. "Turns out that haploids are whatcha call mitochondria — female genes — and an X-haplogroup is a specific subdivision or cluster. The university wags are tryin' to use female lineage to trace tribal migrations and so forth. Something like three percent of Native Americans, Europeans, and Basque belong to the X-group. Least, according to the stuff I thought looked reputable. Says here there's lots of controversy about its significance. Usual academic crap. Whatch you were after?"

"I don't know. Thanks, though."

"You okay, bud? You sound kinda odd."

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"Shucks, Rob, I've been trapped in a car with two redneck psychos for weeks. Might be getting to me, I'll admit."

"Whoa, sorry. Sylvia called and started going on — "

"Everything's hunky-dory, all right?"

"Cool, bro." Rob's tone said nothing was truly cool, but he wasn't in any position to press the issue. There'd be a serious Q&A when I returned, no doubt about it.

Cruz's dad was Basque, wasn't he? Hart was definitely of good, solid German stock only a couple generations removed from the motherland.

Stop me if you've heard this one — a Spaniard, a German, and a Comanche walk into a bar —

After we said good-bye, I dialed my ex and got her machine, caught myself and hung up as it was purring. It occurred to me then, what the pattern was, and I stared dumbly down at the fractured portraits of Penny and Piers as their faces were dappled by sunlight falling through a maze of leaves.

I laughed, bitter.

How in God's name had they ever fooled us into thinking they were people at all? The only things missing from this farce were strings and zippers, a boom mike.

I stuffed the photos and the reports into the valise, stood in the weeds at the edge of the asphalt. My blood still pulsed erratically. Shadows began to crawl deep and blue between the buildings and the trees and in the wake of low-gliding cumulus clouds. Moony's Tavern waited, back there in the golden dust, and Cruz's Chevy before it, stolid as a coffin on the altar.

Something was happening, wasn't it? This thing that was happening, had been happening, could it follow me home if I cut and ran? Would it follow me to Sylvia and Carly?

No way to be certain, no way to tell if I had simply fallen off my rocker — maybe the heat had cooked my brain, maybe I was having a long-overdue nervous breakdown. Maybe, shit. The sinister shape of the world contracted around me, gleamed like the curves of a great killing jar. I heard the lid screwing tight in the endless ultraviolet collisions, the white drone of insects.

I turned right and walked up the hill.

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5.

ABOUT TWO hours later, a guy in a vintage farm truck stopped. The truck had cruised by me twice, once going toward town, then on the way back. And here it was again. I hesitated; nobody braked for hitchhikers unless the hitcher was a babe in tight jeans.

I thought of Piers and Penny, their expressions in the video, drinking us with their smiling mouths, marking us. And if that was true, we'd been weighed, measured and marked, what was the implication? Piers and Penny were two from among a swarm. Was it open season?

The driver studied me with unsettling intensity, his beady eyes obscured by thick, black-rimmed glasses. He beckoned.

My legs were tired already and the back of my neck itched with sunburn. Also, what did it matter anyway? If I were doing anything besides playing out the hand, I would've gone into Olympia and caught a southbound Greyhound. I climbed aboard.

George was a retired civil engineer. Looked the part — crewcut, angular face like a piece of rock, wore a dress shirt with a row of clipped pens and a tie flung over his shoulder, and polyester slacks. He kept NPR on the radio at a mumble. Gripped the wheel with both gnarled hands.

Seemed familiar — a figure dredged from memories of scientists and engineers of my grandfather's generation. He could've been my grandfather. I didn't study him too closely.

George asked me where I was headed. I said Los Angeles and he gave me a glance that said L.A. was in the opposite direction. I told him I wanted to visit the Mima Mounds — since I was in the neighborhood.

There was a heavy silence. A vast and unfathomable pressure built in the cab. At last George said, "Why, they're only a couple miles farther on. Do you know anything about them?"

I admitted that I didn't and he said he figured as much. He told me the Mounds were declared a national monument back in the '60s; the subject of scholarly debate and wildly inaccurate hypotheses. He hoped I wouldn't be disappointed — they weren't glamorous compared to real natural wonders such as Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, or the California Redwoods. The preserve was on the order of five hundred acres, but that

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was nothing. The Mounds had stretched for miles and miles in the old days. The land grabs of the 1890s reduced the phenomenon to a pocket, surrounded it with rundown farms, pastures, and cows. The ruins of America's agrarian era.

I said that it would be impossible to disappoint me.

George turned at a wooden marker with a faded white arrow. A nicely paved single lane wound through temperate rain forest for a mile and looped into a parking lot occupied by the Evergreen vans and a few other vehicles. There was a fence with a gate and beyond that, the vague border of a clearing. Official bulletins were posted every six feet, prohibiting dogs, alcohol, and firearms.

"Sure you want me to leave you here?"

"I'll be fine."

George rustled, his clothes chitin sloughing. "X marks the spot."

I didn't regard him, my hand frozen on the door handle, more than slightly afraid the door wouldn't open. Time slowed, got stuck in molasses. "I know a secret, George."

"What kind of secret?" George said, too close, as if he'd leaned in tight.

The hairs stiffened on the nape of my neck. I swallowed and closed my eyes. "I saw a picture in a biology textbook. There was this bug, looked exactly like a piece of bark, and it was barely touching a beetle with its nose. The one that resembled bark was what entomologists call an assassin bug and it was draining the beetle dry. Know how? It poked the beetle with a razor sharp beak thingy — "

"A rostrum, you mean."

"Exactly. A rostrum, or a proboscis, depending on the species. Then the assassin bug injected digestive fluids, think hydrochloric acid, and sucked the beetle's insides out."

"How lovely," George said.

"No struggle, no fuss, just a couple bugs sitting on a branch. So I'm staring at this book and thinking the only reason the beetle got caught was because it fell for the old piece of bark trick, and then I realized that's how lots of predatory bugs operate. They camouflage themselves and sneak up on hapless critters to do their thing."

"Isn't that the way of the universe?"

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"And I wondered if that theory only applied to insects."

"What do you suppose?"

"I suspect that theory applies to everything."

Zilch from George. Not even the rasp of his breath.

"Bye, George. Thanks for the ride." I pushed hard to open the door and jumped down; moved away without risking a backward glance. My knees were unsteady. After I passed through the gate and approached a bend in the path, I finally had the nerve to check the parking lot. George's truck was gone.

I kept going, almost falling forward.

The trees thinned to reveal the humpbacked plain from the TV picture. Nearby was a concrete bunker shaped like a squat mushroom — a park information kiosk and observation post. It was papered with articles and diagrams under plexiglass. Throngs of brightly clad Asian kids buzzed around the kiosk, laughing over the wrinkled flyers, pointing cameras and chattering enthusiastically. A shaggy guy in a hemp sweater, presumably the professor, lectured a couple of wind-burned ladies who obviously ran marathons in their spare time. The ladies were enthralled.

I mounted the stairs to the observation platform and scanned the environs. As George predicted, the view wasn't staggering. The mounds spread beneath my vantage, none greater than five or six feet in height and largely engulfed in blackberry brambles. Collectively, the hillocks formed a dewdrop hemmed by mixed forest, and toward the narrowing end, a dilapidated trailer court, its structures rendered toys by perspective. The paved footpath coiled unto obscurity.

A radio-controlled airplane whirred in the trailer court airspace. The plane's engine throbbed, a shrill metronome. I squinted against the glare, couldn't discern the operator. My skull ached. I slumped, hugged the valise to my chest, pressed my cheek against damp concrete, and drowsed. Shoes scraped along the platform. Voices occasionally floated by. Nobody challenged me, my derelict posture. I hadn't thought they would. Who'd dare disturb the wildlife in this remote enclave?

My sluggish daydreams were phantoms of the field, negatives of its buckled hide and stealthy plants, and the whispered words *Eastern Washington, South America, Norway*. Scientists might speculate about the geological method of the mounds' creation until doomsday. I knew

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this place and its sisters were unnatural as monoliths hacked from rude stone by primitive hands and stacked like so many dominoes in the uninhabited spaces of the globe. What were they? Breeding grounds, feeding grounds, shrines? Or something utterly alien, something utterly incomprehensible to match the blighted fascination that dragged me ever closer and consumed my will to flee.

Hart's call yanked me from the doldrums. He was drunk. "You shoulda stuck around, Ray-bo. We been huntin' everywhere for you. Cruz ain't in a nice mood." The connection was weak, a transmission from the dark side of Pluto. Batteries were dying.

"Where are you?" I rubbed my gummy eyes and stood.

"We're at the goddamned Mounds. Where are you?"

I spied a tiny glint of moving metal. The Chevy rolled across the way where the road and the mobile homes intersected. I smiled — Cruz hadn't been looking for me; he'd been trolling around on the wrong side of the park, frustrated because he'd missed the entrance. As I watched, the car slowed and idled in the middle of the road. "I'm here."

The cell phone began to click like a Geiger counter that'd hit the mother lode. Bits of fiddle music pierced the garble.

The car jolted from a savage tromp on the gas and listed ditchward. It accelerated, jounced and bounded into the field, described a haphazard arc in my direction. I had a momentary terror that they'd seen me atop the tower, were coming for me, were planning some unhinged brand of retribution. But no, the distance was too great. I was no more than a speck, if I was anything. Soon, the car lurched behind the slope of intervening hillocks and didn't emerge.

"Hart, are you there?"

The clicking intensified and abruptly chopped off, replaced by smooth, bottomless static. Deep sea squeals and warbles began to filter through. Bees humming. A castrati choir on a gramophone. Giggling. Someone, perhaps Cruz, whispering a Latin prayer. I was grateful when the phone made an electronic protest and expired. I hurled it over the side.

The college crowd had disappeared. Gone too, the professor and his admirers. I might've joined the migration if I hadn't spotted the cab of George's truck mostly hidden by a tree. It was the only rig in the parking lot. I couldn't tell if anyone was behind the wheel.

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The sun hung low and fat, reddening as it sank. The breeze had cooled. It plucked at my hair, dried my sweat, chilled me a little. I listened for the roar of the Chevy, buried to the axles in loose dirt, high-centered on a stump; or perhaps they'd abandoned the vehicle. Thus I strained to pick my companions from among the blackberry patches and softly undulating clumps of scotch broom which had invaded this place too.

Quiet.

I went down the stairs and let the path take me. I went as a man in a stupor, my muscles lethargic with dread. The lizard subprocessor in my brain urged me to sprint for the highway, to scuttle into a burrow. It possessed a hint of what waited over the hill, had possibly witnessed this melodrama many times before. I whistled a dirge through clenched teeth and the mounds closed ranks behind me.

Ahead, came the dull clank of a slamming door.

The car was stalled at the foot of a steep slope, its hood buried in a tangle of brush. The windows were dark as a muddy aquarium and festooned with fleshy creepers and algid scum.

I took root a few yards from the car, noting that the engine was dead, yet the vehicle rocked on its springs from some vigorous activity. A rhythmic motion that caused metal to complain. The brake lights stuttered.

Hart's doughy face materialized on the passenger side, bumped against the glass with the dispassion of a pale, exotic fish, and withdrew, descending into a marine trench. His forehead left a starry impact. Someone's palm smacked the rear window, hung there, fingers twitching.

I retreated. Ran, more like. I may have shrieked. Somewhere along the line the valise flew open and its contents spilled — a welter of files, the argyle socks Carly gave me for Father's Day, my toiletries. A handful of photographs pinwheeled in a gust. I dropped the bag. Ungainly, panicked, I didn't get far, tripped and collapsed as the sky blackened and a high-pitched keening erupted from several locations simultaneously. In moments all ambient light had been sucked away; I couldn't see the thorny bush gouging my neck as I wriggled for cover, couldn't make out my own hand before my eyes.

The keening ceased. Peculiar echoes bounced in its wake, gave me the absurd sensation of lying on a sound stage with the kliegs shut off. I

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received the impression of movement around my hunkered self, although I didn't hear footsteps. I shuddered, pressed my face deeper into musty soil. Ants investigated my pants cuffs.

Cruz called my name from the throat of a distant tunnel. I knew it wasn't him and kept silent. He cursed me and giggled the unpleasant giggle I'd heard on the phone. Hart tried to coax me out, but this imitation was even worse. They went down the entire list and despite everything I was tempted to answer when Carly began crying and hiccuping and begging me to help her, Daddy please, in a baby girl voice she hadn't owned for several years. I stuffed my fist in my mouth, held on while the chorus drifted here and there and eventually receded into the buzz and chirr of field life.

The sun flickered on and the world was restored piecemeal — one root, one stump, one hill at a time. My head swam, reminded me of waking from anesthesia.

Dusk was blooming when I crept from the bushes and tasted the air, cocked an ear for predators. The Chevy was there, shimmering in the twilight. Motionless now.

I could've crouched in my blind forever, wild-eyed as a hare run to ground in a ruined shirt and piss-stained slacks. But it was getting cold and I was thirsty, so I slunk across the park at an angle that took me to the road near the trailer court. I went, casting glances over my shoulder for pursuit that never came.

6.

I TOLD A RETIREE sipping ice tea in a lawn chair that my car had broken down and he let me use his phone to call a taxi. If he witnessed Cruz crash the Chevy into the Mounds, he wasn't saying. The police didn't show while I waited and that said enough about the situation.

The taxi driver was a stolid Samoan who proved not the least bit interested in my frightful appearance or talking. He drove way too fast for comfort, if I'd been in a rational frame of mind, and dropped me at the Greyhound depot in downtown Olympia.

I wandered inside past the rag-tag gaggle of modern gypsies which

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inevitably haunted these terminals, studied the big board while the ticket agent pursed her lips in distaste. Her expression certified me as one of the unwashed mob.

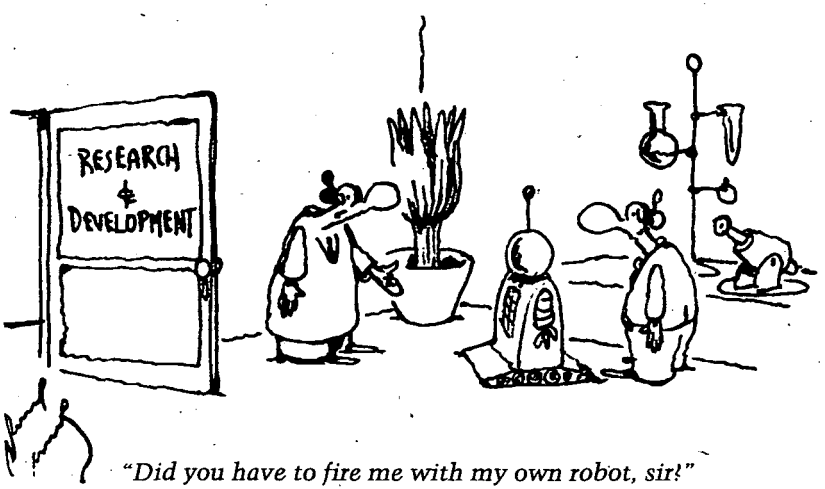
I picked Seattle at random, bought a ticket. The ticket got me the key to the restroom, where I splashed my welted flesh, combed cat tails from my hair and looked almost human again. Almost. The fluorescent tube crackled and sizzled, threatened to plunge the crummy toilet into darkness, and in the discotheque flashes, my haggard face seemed strange.

The bus arrived an hour late and it was crammed. I shared a seat with a middle-aged woman in a shawl and a bucket of costume jewelry. Her ivory skin was hard and she smelled of chlorine. I didn't imagine she wanted to sit by me, judging from the flare of her nostrils, the crimp of her over-glossed mouth.

Soon the bus was chugging into the wasteland of night and the lights clicked off row by row as passengers succumbed to sleep. Except some guy near the front who left his overhead lamp on to read, and me. I was too exhausted to close my eyes.

I surprised myself by crying.

And the woman surprised me again by murmuring, "Hush, hush, dear. Hush, hush." She patted my trembling shoulder. Her hand lingered.



"Did you have to fire me with my own robot, sir!"

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

The Marching Models

"Bookworms and buxom models — perfect together.

"The Penguin Publishing company is sending out sexy fashion models onto the sidewalks of London to grab men they see carrying Penguin books and reward them with cash prizes of up to $1800.

" 'It's to sex up the book industry, which probably needs it,' said Neil Griffiths, author of Penguin-published *Betrayal in Naples*."

— *The New York Post*, June 8, 2004.

LL OF MY friends were suddenly getting married. This was most disconcerting to me. Every one of my old, reliable routines and assumptions was being overthrown. I hardly knew what to make of the current fad among my stodgy crowd for getting hitched.

I and my many peers now spontaneously forming marital unions were hardly youngsters. We were all middle-aged males long habituated to solitary lifestyles devoted to books. Literature, scholarly research, the passions of the mind. These were the lonely yet proud intellectual concerns that had filled our lives till now. As for social intercourse, we generally limited that to an occasional night at such bookish pubs as the Slippered Don or the Exegete or the Elephant Folio, nights spent discussing the wild-eyed opinions found in the latest issue of the *London Times Literary Supplement*. Or perhaps if we were feeling particularly bold, we might all pitch in and charter a bus for an excursion to Hay-on-Wye. Not exactly the kinds of activities or venues where one was likely to meet beautiful future mates.

And beautiful these women undeniably were. The four or five weddings I had attended so far had all featured brides of surpassing attractiveness. These tall, tanned, willowy, well-endowed women seemed a race apart from the grooms,

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all unprepossessing fellows such as myself, stoop-shouldered from hours of deskwork, pasty-complexioned from dwelling in library stacks. The betrothal of an Eloi to a Morlock could not have been more disconcerting.

And now, today, I had yet another such function to attend. Old Charlie Purslane was taking the plunge. How the demands of married life would possibly allow Charlie to complete his annotated bibliography of every Temperance pamphlet ever printed, I could not fathom. What a waste of such a fine mind and decades of scholarship.

At the church, I found myself seated perforce next to a modishly dressed young stranger on the bride's side of the aisle. Charlie's allotted pews were filled with his numerous relatives, all of whom seemed stunned to be witnessing Charlie's unlikely transition at this late age to married bliss.

Before the ceremony began, I found myself talking to the stranger next to me, out of simple courtesy.

"I presume you're related to the bride."

"Not really. We work together."

"Oh. In what capacity?"

"Sheila's a professional model. I run the agency that employs her."

"Very interesting. Perhaps you know the story of how she and Charlie met...?"

"Sure I do. It's this crazy Penguin advertising campaign. They're sending gorgeous models out onto the streets all across the country to reward anyone they spot carrying a Penguin title. And this gimmick is losing me my girls as fast as I can provide them."

"What do you mean?"

"It's you damn boffins! Excuse my harshness, nothing personal, you understand. Just that you and your kind are making my job hell."

"What can you possibly mean?"

"My models are falling heads over heels for you eggheads. Once they get talking with you big-brain types in the street, they're hooked. These women generally don't interact with your type of chap, the bookworms. It's only this foolish publicity stunt that's breaking down the natural barriers between models and anoraks. And my employees have never been exposed to conversation about intellectual matters before. No one's ever talked to these girls politely and intelligently and sincerely before. It's damnably seductive! They have no natural resistance to your line of patter. The next thing I know, they're resigning from my agency to get married

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and take up a life of literary soirees in Hampstead or Islington or Highgate. And the first thing they generally do is get preggers. After that, there's no chance of me getting them back into the modeling game."

"Ah, that explains everything. I had wondered where these stunning women were coming from. I knew my friends wouldn't be capable of meeting them on their own. I assume you and Penguin will be forced to discontinue your publicity efforts then, given the mortality rate of the spokesmodels."

"Far from it! Penguin doesn't know anything yet about these developments. You think I want to lose them as a client? So far as they believe, everything's going smashingly. In fact, they plan to expand their campaign. And that's fine with me. I take this temporary setback as a personal affront. I'm going to keep a steady stream of beautiful women catwalking onto the streets until every one of you bookworms is married off. Then the promotional business can get back to normal. Once I run out of local girls, I start outsourcing. There's a huge pool of Russians and Eastern Europeans. Then I go to Asia. There's no way you and your kind can beat me."

"How very curious. This all reminds me of that story concerning Shaw and the beautiful young actress. She suggested that, given his brains and her looks, they should have a child together. But Shaw worried it might get *her* brains and *his* looks."

"Don't trouble yourself about that outcome. These women may be uncultured, but they're no dummies. They've got excellent genes and a certain canny ambition. These unlikely new couples are going to produce some exceptional children."

We had to end our conversation then, for the music had begun. Down the aisle came Charlie and his best man, followed shortly thereafter by the glamorous, radiant Sheila and her bridesmaids.

Leaving the church, I wondered about the ultimate outcome of all this outbreeding. Where could such an intermingling of formerly separate castes — the brainy and the beautiful — lead? I couldn't say, but I knew one thing for sure.

I was going to make a point of strolling through London more often, and I was going to be sure to carry a Penguin or three.

An excerpt from *The Rise and Triumph of the Glamensas*, by

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Charles Purslane V, virally distributed by HarperGoogle, 2125.

... obvious in retrospect. The hundreds of children born to the "Penguin Parents" — as the couples who had met as a result of the famous promotional stunt engineered by Penguin Publishing came to be called — were models of hybrid vigor. Unlike earlier half-hearted attempts to engineer a glamorous multigenerational elite — consult the index to this book under "Tyler, Liv"; "Hudson, Kate"; "Matlin & Carville"; and "Auster & Hustvedt" — the Penguin Parents progeny proved that discourse longer than a soundbite was still feasible fodder for the mediasphere.

Possessing in almost all cases the superb intellects of their fathers and the mesmerizing good looks of their mothers, they rapidly succeeded at anything they turned their hands to. (The so-called "Shavian" offspring, a small unfortunate mirror-image minority, generally died early and left no descendents. One memorable exception to this rule was the ugly and brutish Montana Coogan, who grew up to become the late-twenty-first century's most rapacious literary agent.) Their passage through society was greased by both intelligence and beauty. As a Glamensa myself, I can testify to the overwhelming effect that a combination of wit and attractiveness exerts on the average mundane.

The first generation of Glamensas deliberately did not favor exogamy, but bred only with their own kind, Darwinically ramping up their genes to even greater potency. By the third generation, the mediagenic Glamensas, almost a separate species, had occupied most of the truly important positions in government, industry, and culture in Britain. By the time I was born, my kind was effectively rulers not only of our country, but of a large portion of the globe, thanks to interlocking directorates, treaties and the like. The populace of mundanes, relieved and grateful for the beneficent rule of beautiful geniuses, heartily support the Glamensa regime.

Where will our elite go from here? Wherever killer cheekbones and gray matter can take us....

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Richard Mueller published about a dozen stories in our pages in the 1980s, then let other creative endeavors take him away from writing fiction. Recently he got bitten again by the short-story bug and we've been pleased to bring you results such as "Jew if by Sea" and "I Am the City." His new one is a heartfelt tale of life on the rails.

Dutch

By Richard Mueller

I FIRST MET DUTCH BACK in '73. I'd just gotten back from Vietnam and had managed to get into the Burlington Northern's engineer training program — though it was just the Burlington then, the C.B.&Q. I'd ridden the train into Chicago with a letter from my Uncle Walter, my discharge papers, my hopes high and, wonder of wonders, I got a job on the first try. Not that I was a complete novice. I'd jockied yard goats and short-haul switchers in the Explosive Loading Section in Saigon, running ammunition up the coast as far as Nha Tran, and occasionally doubling with Vietnam Railway crews to haul refugees or troops on the line. As it became clear that we were losing, that the heart had gone out of the South Vietnamese cause, I'd worked closer and closer to Saigon. I had shuttled boxcars and coaches to where they were needed until the collapse, when our unit was disbanded and assigned to an Engineer Battalion, ripping up tracks and wrecking rolling stock. Finally, we boarded an LST for Guam and home and mustering out.

So I brought military railroad experience to the job, and that, coupled

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with the letter from Uncle Walter (who had hogged Prairies and Mikes during the '40s and '50s), landed me one of the few trainee jobs available. By 1978 I was pushing a peddler freight down to Galesburg and back and it was there, in the Galesburg Yard on a cold and windy morning in March, that I first met Dutch.

He looked to be my age, about thirty, lean and road-tough, dressed for hard travel. He was wearing jeans, engineer boots, and a duffle coat, and he had a good army pack over his shoulder. He was standing by the track, watching my Geep grind toward him, just as if it were the town bus and he was heading off to the first shift at the Caterpillar plant. I had to smile. He looked like he thought I was going to pick him up, but I was getting ready to accelerate. I had a yellow light. The moment it went green, I'd notch her up and be headed back to Chicago, a string of empties and loaners behind me. Back in the crummy, my fireman was drinking coffee and I was looking forward to a milk run and then the light changed to red. I cut my speed, touched the brakes, and we drifted to a stop. I looked down at the tall, angular stranger by the tracks.

I know now what moved Dutch, what drove him on mile after mile, year after year, how powerful and terrible and irresistible that compulsion was. How it ruled Dutch and how it reached out to those around him. It was a force of nature, and at that moment it wrapped itself around me and pried open my preconceptions. I understood the man standing by the tracks, felt his need and urgency, felt his connection to the great diesel, its wheels standing on steel ribbons leading everywhere. I knew the air, the wind and cold, the towns and cities and the immense spaces between. And the fragility of it all. I could not turn away from this man.

"Where ya headed?" I asked.

He smiled, his shoulders hunched against the cold. "East," he said. "Chicago right now."

"Come on up."

He climbed easily into the cab, pulled down the jump seat, and settled himself. After a moment the light turned green and we were off to Chicago.

I didn't learn much about him that day. He called himself Dutch, he was from California, he rode the trains a lot, and he was headed east. By observation I guessed he was a good listener and didn't like to talk much. His clothes were patched but clean. His hair and beard were neatly

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trimmed. I let him off at the west end of Chicago Hump. He waved goodbye and headed out to catch a train for the east.

I figured I'd never see Dutch again, but three months later, as I pulled out of Aurora in the same Geep, heading west, I saw him step off a Burlington commuter train. He waved to the conductor and started across the tracks toward my engine.

"Dutch, I didn't know you rode passenger trains."

"Sometimes," he said with a smile. I waved him up and he settled onto the jumpseat.

"Headin' west?"

"Headin' west."

He said maybe six words on the rest of the run and then I dropped him off in Galesburg so he could connect with a westbound rattler.

After I did my turnaround, I went down to the beanery for a hot turkey sandwich and a cup of coffee. The Yardmaster, a big black man named Rufe Carillo, came in and slid into my booth. "I seed you drop off Dutch," he rumbled, signaling the waitress for coffee. I looked hard at Carillo.

"You gonna write me up, Rufe?"

Rufe sipped his coffee. "You know it's against the rules, and if it was anyone but Dutch I'd generate some paper on ya...." Rufe loved to generate paper. He stared at me. "Whaddaya make a that guy?"

Coffee became pie and ice cream and a cigar and the air conditioning pumped away, with the weather outside all cicadas and heat shimmering above the rails. Fishing weather. I didn't know what to say about Dutch and I told Rufe so. "Well, nobody does. He's a mystery wrapped in a riddle inside a enigma."

I laughed. "You just make that up?"

"Naw, I heard it on TV." He sipped his coffee. "According to Dutch, I watch too much TV. I need to read more books."

I pushed back my plate. "What do you know about him, Rufe?"

Rufe frowned. He probably wanted me to call him "Mr. Carillo." "About what everybody else knows," he said at last. "Squat. Hey, there's a project for ya, kid. You got yer G.I. Bill. Go to school and get a education before one a them damn diesels shakes your liver loose or cuts off your foot. Take psychology classes and maybe you can figure out what makes ole Dutch tick."

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Instead I began asking the other engineers about Dutch and building up a file of popular misconceptions about who the man was. Holy Joe Gordon, who drove on the Minneapolis run, insisted that Dutch was a fallen angel, thrown down upon the Earth to test Lucifer's greed. Just how this would test Lucifer's greed he could not say, but Holy Joe was certain that he was privy to God's cosmic plan.

Sid Beller had heard from a guy in the Chicago P.D. that Dutch was a diamond smuggler and always had a fortune in gems in his pocket.

Another thought he was working for the FBI, looking for sabotage on the railroads.

A fireman up in Savannah claimed that Dutch was a spirit sent to herald the second coming of Christ but that he'd lost his way and was riding the trains to find his way back to the correct spiritual path. Engineers picked him up because it was a holy act. I heard a lot of that sort of talk. There seemed to be quite a bit of religion riding the rails and working the trains back in the '80s. Maybe it had something to do with Reagan.

Of course, there were the profane suggestions too. A waitress at the Hotcake House in Knoxville said that Dutch was running away from wives in eight states. A yard man said that he was fleeing a series of paternity suits. That he'd killed a man in Texas, in Alaska, in Wisconsin, two men in Kansas.

Which meant that Dutch was an urban legend and among railway men he soon assumed the status of the Phantom Hitchhiker. Everyone claimed to have seen him, most hoggers still picked him up, and I never heard anyone say a bad word about his manners or his conduct. Dutch charmed everyone he met, though there was a tragic aura about him, a feeling that he was a survivor of some terrible disaster. Many men become enamored of the rails, fall in love with the sounds of a train in the night and go back again and again; but with Dutch it was like he was a part of the system, throbbing in the steel like those electrical pulses that activate the signals. Like an engine he could not leave the ribbons of steel but was condemned to ride on them forever.

After that I didn't see Dutch for a few years, though he passed back and forth on the Burlington more than once. The Burlington became the Burlington Northern and soon I was pushing long-haul freights through

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the Big Sky Country. I was living in Minneapolis then, married, and taking extension courses at the U. I had pretty much forgotten about Dutch. Then one night at the University Library I ran into a face I hadn't seen in a while.

"Rufe?" I was not surprised that Rufus Carillo was older and heavier and grayer — but I didn't expect to find him in Minneapolis in a library.

"Hey, hey, hogger." He grasped my hand in a bone-crunching grip. "So you did go to college."

"And you decided to read more books."

"Yeah," he said, "but that's not why I'm here tonight. I'm picking up my grandson. I's retired now an livin' in Minneapolis with my daughter and son-in-law. Come down the Model Railroad Club some Wednesday night and we'll chew the fat."

"Can't get away from the trains, huh?"

"Never. They're in ma blood." He looked around for his grandson, who was late, then fished out a clipping. "I been carrying this around for years."

CHILD KILLED IN RR MISHAP

Thomas Lamson, 5, was killed Saturday afternoon when he was struck by a train in the Santa Fe yards in City of Industry. His mother, Elizabeth Lamson, 23, and her boyfriend Robert Jenkins, 26, had taken the boy trainwatching and, during a moment of inattention, the boy had slipped away. Jenkins and Lamson were searching for her son when he was struck and killed by an arriving train. The death was ruled to be an accident and no charges were filed.

"Where'd you get this, Rufe?"

Rufe sighed. "One night about four years ago Dutch came in on the dog. It was late, I was going off shift and I told him that he could come home and sleep in our spare room. Mrs. Carillo was alive then and she liked it when I brought the guys home to share her cooking.

"Well, Dutch shipped out in the morning and later the Mrs. found that clipping under the bed in the spare room. I been meaning to get it back to him but I din't get a chance before I retired. Maybe you'll see him."

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I thought about that a lot over the next six months as I pushed my freights back and forth to Whitefish but I never saw Dutch. In fact, I didn't see him again for another two years.

I'd been fishing up north near Silver Bay and on the way back I stopped in Duquette to eat lunch in a diner by the GB&W tracks. As I got out of my truck, a red and white Green Bay road switcher was pulling into town with a cut of empty centerbeam flats, and I saw a familiar figure swing down from the cab. I watched as he walked toward the diner, his pack over his shoulder, looking for all the world like a local just dropping in for a bite. Then, remembering the clipping in my wallet, I followed him in.

Dutch was sitting in a booth by the window, so I slipped into the facing bench seat. "Buy ya lunch, pal?"

He broke into a broad smile. "Red. You working on the Green Bay these days?"

"No, I'm still with the Burly-Q. I've been up north, fishing." We ordered and Dutch asked me about the fish, my health, my family, Minneapolis, almost anything but trains, but I guess he saw enough of them. He was delighted to hear I was taking courses at U. Minn.

"What in?"

"I guess you'd call it a dual major. History and journalism." Dutch nodded and sipped his coffee. "So what have you been doing?" I asked.

He laughed. "What I always do. I ride the trains. I work some."

"I wanted to ask you about that, Dutch," I said. "Where do you get your money?"

He looked at me as if I had just committed an act of unexpected rudeness. I had, and it was intentional. He chewed his lip. "I tole ya, Red. I work some."

"Come on, Bob," I said. "You can do better than that."

He stared at me with an expression of desolation that said his deepest secret had been uncovered, and worse, uncovered by a friend. As if Dutch could really be said to have any friends. "Bob?" he said, softly.

"Robert Jenkins, right?"

He glanced out the window at the diesel idling across the highway, then at the crewmen eating in the far booth. "Where'd you hear that?"

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I pushed the clipping across the table. "Rufe Carillo thought you might want this back."

"How is Rufe?"

"He's good. Retired, living in Minneapolis with his kids and grandkids."

"Good old Rufe," he muttered, folding the clipping carefully and slipping it into his shirt pocket. He didn't look at it. He didn't have to.

"Why'd you run to the rails, Dutch? No charges were filed. What the hell happened?" I set down a twenty to cover lunch. "Let's walk."

We crossed the highway and walked along the rails, heading toward the yard limit sign on the east edge of town. "Why do you want to know?"

I shrugged. "Because I'm curious. Because of the history, I guess." I tried unsuccessfully to keep the anger out of my voice as I added, "Maybe because I think you're getting a raw deal."

His laugh was harsh and brittle. "If I am, it's my deal. I dealt the hand. I'll play it out," he said.

"Yeah? Well, that doesn't make it right. Just stupid."

"I can't fault ya there," he replied.

"Christ, Dutch, it's been twenty-five years. The state would have paroled you in eight. Why are you here?"

And at that moment I almost lost him. I thought he'd turn away, leave and cut whatever tenuous string still bound us together, but Dutch was also tied to the rails with mighty cables. Duquette had only the one rail line, and on that line only one train ran. Completely by chance I'd cornered him, and the habits of charming defeat, of stiff surrender and polished politeness that he had carefully constructed over the years would not allow him to fight me. "Why do you have to know?" he said at last. "Why do you care?"

"Because I think it's time for you to let it out."

He snorted. "You takin' psychology courses too?"

"Dutch, I've had three wives. I've got a kid and miles of track behind me, and at fifty-two I'm lost in my own damned future."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know," I said honestly, "but I need some answers."

We were sitting on the edge of a flatcar, the late April sun falling across us in long ragged strips, patterns cut from the holes in the centerbeam running down the length of the car. Nearby, on the ground, a

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dozen sparrows were reducing a pile of spilled grain. Dutch looked at them for a long time and said nothing. Then he turned to me and nodded. "All right, Red. Maybe it's time."

"I GREW UP IN Los Angeles, in the Fairfax District. I went to Hollywood High School with a bunch of kids who were destined to be minor actors, little stars in the firmament no one would remember. Nobody famous, just working actors.

"I liked all that stuff and when I graduated, a guy I knew who was a few years older got me into the Stage Electrician's Guild as an apprentice. It was a good job and I made some nice money. After my folks were killed in a car accident when I was twenty-two, I was on my own.

"I had a little house and a car and lots of work on soaps and game shows. I read and I had some hobbies but I was lonely. I didn't have a lot of friends and I spent most of my time by myself. Then I met Elizabeth.

"I used to go up to the band shell in Griffith Park to read and sketch and listen to the L.A. Philharmonic rehearse. Elizabeth was a fill-in violinist, an understudy who covered for the third and fourth chairs, so she was always there. Sometimes she played and sometimes she watched, and finally one day she sat down and asked me what I was doing. Well, what I was doing was sketching. I used to draw pictures of the musicians, of the scenery, of things in my head. On that day I had drawn a picture of her. She liked it so I gave it to her.

"The next time I came to watch a rehearsal, she was playing. I watched and waited until she finished and when she did she came over and asked if I wanted to go out for coffee.

"I don't know how these things start, but ours began because neither of us had anyone to talk to. We lived about thirty miles apart — L.A. is big; dozens of towns connected by freeways but we visited and started going to movies and dinners. And we fell in love. We talked about moving in together and living as a couple, though she was dead set against marriage. 'Fool me once' was one of her favorite expressions. She had her music and her job and her son. Things were good for a time — but I guess things change. You think it's gonna go on forever and you're gonna see the same face every morning for the rest of your life and you forget that it can all go

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away in an instant. But you know about that, don't you? I mean, you've been married three times.

"Well, it happened on a late spring day. Her son Tommy was a sweet kid. He liked me and he loved trains so we used to go trainwatching on Sundays. There was a spot by the Santa Fe yards where we could put down a blanket and eat a picnic lunch and watch the trains go in and out of the yard.

"Tommy knew never to go off the grass onto the gravel and cinders where the tracks were. On that day he was playing, and Elizabeth and I were talking about being in love and getting a house and moving in together. I tell ya, Red, it was the last peaceful moment of my life.

"She looked up, like an animal does when it senses danger, and said, 'Where's Tommy?' because suddenly he was nowhere in sight. Kids do that, but I didn't know enough about kids to expect it. He was just a good kid, and I loved him because I loved his mother.

"We ran into the yard, looking for him, and when I found him he was about a hundred feet away, standing by the rails, and the ground was shaking and I could hear the train bearing down upon us. Tommy was watching it approach, a huge, fast, perishable drag, balling hard through on the main, with the engineer hanging on the horn. I guess he was hoping that it would scare Tommy away — but it didn't.

"I started to run, leaping over the intervening tracks to get to him and then I...I faltered. It was as if I knew that even if I got there in time to save him my momentum would carry us both into the train. But I didn't know that. I didn't understand anything. I just stopped ten feet short and the train went by, brakes screaming — and for a second Tommy was okay. I looked into his face and he smiled at me, then he put his hand back as if he was trying to touch the train and it took him. There was that second, and then he was gone.

"I fell to my knees and bellowed out something — something older than trains or men, and that's when I heard Elizabeth screaming. She'd seen the whole thing: the train, Tommy, and me stopped short of saving him.

"The police came and all through it we sat side by side answering questions. She never cried and she never looked at me. But when it was over she said, 'You could have saved him,' then she got up and walked away."

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I glanced at Dutch but he was looking off to the east, toward Michigan, toward something no one else could see. I could think of nothing to say, so I put a hand on his shoulder. It felt cold. Finally he spoke.

"I went home that night and realized that I had lost everything, thrown it away through cowardice, or a lack of faith, or something I could not name or understand. And I decided that I could not live that way."

"So you went to the rails," I said, my voice flat and hollow.

"Yes, but not to ride. I drove down to the mainline in Burbank, parked my car and walked over to the tracks. And I waited. A lot of fast trains come through there and I fully intended to step in front of the first one. Thirty, forty minutes passed and I waited, listening to the night noises. Then a light appeared, coming around the bend, and I felt a sudden peace. I knew that I could not change anything that had happened but I could redeem my own debt, cancel out the pain I was carrying, now and forever."

"What happened?"

Dutch smiled, almost wistfully. "We don't get many thunder storms in southern California. The sky was cloudy, but I hadn't heard any rumbling. Then a bolt of lightning came down and hit the Allen Avenue signal bridge. There was this flash and I felt this pain in my chest, and I was out.

When I came to, all of the signals were flashing red and the train that was coming toward me drifted down to a stop until the cab of the lead unit was right in front of me. The engineer looked down at me and said something I don't remember, and I said something, and then I was climbing up into the cab. By morning I was in Reno and after a time I became Dutch."

"You chose the name," I said.

"Yes."

"After the Flying Dutchman."

"Yes." He looked at me and ran his hand along the sill of the flatcar. "After, I found that I could not leave. Every time I tried I had to come back because the pain drew me. You know the story, the legend."

"Yes," I said. "The sailor could only be redeemed by the love of a pure woman."

"And the only pure woman I ever knew...." He didn't complete the thought. He didn't have to. But I had to know.

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"Dutch. What happened to Elizabeth?"

"I don't know," he said. For the first time I knew that he was lying. And by his demeanor I understood that our conversation was over. He pushed himself off the car and landed nimbly on his feet. The sparrows scattered. The train crew were coming out of the diner. I climbed down.

"Dutch."

"Ummmm."

"Thanks for telling me the story. I've been wanting to know for a long time."

He barked out a short, bitter laugh. "The past is the past," he said.

As we walked toward the engine, I fished a card out of my pocket. "Here. If you come through Minneapolis, call me."

He said he would. Then he climbed up, waved once, and was off to the west.

Two years later I retired. I hung up my watch and started a minor career in journalism. Two months after that, on a rainy April night while I was trying to craft a story on The World Theatre, my phone rang. It was Dutch. I met him at the freight yards and brought him home.

He walked around my little house, looking at my sparse, neat surroundings; my books, my office, the framed Charlie Lewis railroad prints in the study. "This is nice," he said at last. "Someday I'd like to have a place like this. You've done well."

"I'm making a living," I said, pushing the point a bit. "And you, Dutchman. Ever think about giving up the silver steel seas?"

He smiled. "Very poetic. I'll bet you're a pretty good journalist."

"I do all right," I said, but I wasn't going to let him off the hook. "Well, Dutch? Are you ever going to give up riding the trains? You're getting older, and they're getting more dangerous."

It was true. With containers and open-well flatcars replacing the old boxcars it was harder to ride on the freights and a lot of the older engineers Dutch knew well were retiring. The younger guys weren't nearly as sympathetic; he'd have to wait longer between rides.

"You know I can't leave, Red," he said at last, the age lines deepening in his face. Dutch looked like he belonged in my old stuffed chair, my Burlington coffee mug in his mitt, but he was a coiled spring, waiting to

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be released. He sighed. "If I stay away more than a day my chest starts to ache where the lightning hit me. Thirty-six hours and I'm a wreck, so I stay close to the trains."

We sat for a while and I saw his body slowly relax. I had the radio on; soft music, Chopin I think. Elizabeth Lamson was a concert violinist. I wondered if Dutch listened to classical music and thought of her. I hated to break the mood, but there was no telling when I'd see him again. I reached into my desk and withdrew a cloth-covered scrapbook.

"What's this?"

"It's everything I could find on Elizabeth. And you."

"Me?"

"Yeah. Most of it's articles on Elizabeth Lamson. She's first chair now, but I think you know that."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know it."

"And there are five articles on you, three of them by me. You're human interest, Bob."

"Not to me, I'm not."

I was silent for a moment. I was about to lower the hammer and I didn't feel good about it, but it had to be done. "I sent copies of my columns to Ms. Lamson, care of the L.A. Phil. She wrote me a letter. I think you should have it."

Dutch appeared to be in shock. I knew that reaction. There are those moments when the hit to your brain and heart are so heavy that you can't move. Your body shuts down, as if it's waiting for everything just to go away, like that thousand-yard-stare shell shock that combat soldiers get. I unfolded my reading glasses and put them on, then pulled the letter out of my pocket and opened it.

I thought that Dutch might say something or try to stop me but he sat there like a pale gray shadow, staring at his hands.

Dear Mr. Corcoran,

Thank you for sending me your articles about Rob. Since you knew to contact me I presume that you know some of our story so I won't comment on it here. I've often thought of Rob and wondered how he was, what he was doing, if he were all right. He disappeared the day after the death of my son and I never heard from him again.

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I'm going to send a letter to Rob in care of you in Minneapolis. If you see him again, please pass it along. And thank you for your concern. If you're ever in Los Angeles come and see us at the Philharmonic as my guest.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth Lamson

Dutch looked at me. I nodded and passed him the second letter, still sealed. He looked at it, at her handwriting on the envelope, then folded his hands around it. "Thanks," he said softly.

"I'm heading up to bed," I said. "Use the spare room. I'll see you in the morning.

At the foot of the stairs I glanced back and he was still sitting there, staring at the envelope. When I came down in the morning he was gone.

I didn't think I'd ever see or hear from Dutch again but, a year and a half later in the spring, my doorbell rang. At first I did not recognize the man standing on my porch.

His hair was neatly trimmed and he was clean-shaven. He wore a light gray, summer-weight suit and a tie. I gaped, he smiled. "Dutch?"

"Hi, Red," he said. His smile broadened as he offered me his hand. "Have I come at a bad time?"

"No, not at all," I said, ushering him in. I noticed that he had no backpack. "I'd be willing to bet you didn't come in on a freight dressed like that."

He shrugged, apologetically, almost as if he were asking forgiveness of the great American rail system, and said, "No, I flew."

"You broke the curse!"

He lifted his hands as if to say, "it was nothing," and asked, "You got a favorite place to eat around here? I'll buy you dinner. I owe you plenty. It's the least I can do."

I couldn't believe the change in Rob until I remembered that he'd been an observer. He'd gone all over the country, seen everything, but seldom spoke. And he hadn't missed a trick. We got a booth at Casa Milano and ordered — northern Italian fare and white wine — and Rob began to talk. I ate and mostly listened.

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"I read those columns over and over again, Red — both yours and the ones about Elizabeth. And the letter from Elizabeth. You never saw that letter, did you?"

I shook my head.

"Essentially it said just two things; 'I loved you,' and 'Why did you leave?'"

"Wow."

"Yeah. It was hard to hear; not like I didn't know it. It was pretty strong and it was final, but I knew that I had to answer her. I knew I had to go back."

"You could have written a letter."

"No," he said. "That wouldn't have been right. I had no address so she couldn't have responded. I had to go see her.

"I was afraid she hated me. She had every right to, and I knew that."

"You wanted to give her her shot," I said. "Her innings."

"I was tired. I just wanted it to end, even if she wound up hating me."

I remembered the columns about her career with the Philharmonic, about her charity work. "She wouldn't have done that," I said.

"You'd be surprised at what people will do," he replied, staring into his glass. "You'd truly be surprised." He sighed, and a shadow seemed to pass across his face before he spoke again. "No, I hoped that she wouldn't hate me; it would have been more than I could bear but I needed to know. I needed to seal it off and either die or heal somehow."

"You were tired of the trains."

He laughed tightly. "Oh, you have no idea. So I rode a freight into L.A. and I went out to Griffith Park to watch the Philharmonic rehearse.

"After they finished, I figured that she'd go off with her friends but she walked out to the seats of the amphitheater and sat in the sun, going through the next concert's music, making notations. She was still tall and slim, but her long curly hair was gray now and she carried herself with, well, with such grace and peacefulness.

"I sat for a long time in the seats above, watching her. She was sitting where we had first met years ago. God, Red, it was breaking my heart."

I nodded. I'd had my heart broken more than once, and knew how the smallest thing could set it off. "Did you — ?"

"Yeah. After a while, I got up and walked down to her. She looked up,

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and for a moment she couldn't place me so I said, 'Elizabeth, it's me, Rob.'

"Red, do you know how it is when someone hears something they can't take in and there's this curtain that comes down across their face and hides everything until they can sort it out? That's what it was like. She couldn't process it. She just stared at me.

"Finally she picked up her sheet music from the seat beside her and I sat down, hunting for words. Spending most of your time alone doesn't make you a good conversationalist and I'm a quiet person anyway. Finally I said, 'It's good to see you. You're looking well.'

"She looked at me for a long time and then she touched my face, like she was trying to make sure that I was real. Then she asked me why I'd run away. I said that I couldn't live with myself with what I'd done, that I hadn't gone out to run away, but had gone to kill myself."

I nodded, numbly, and Rob closed his eyes at the memory. Then he went on. "When I said it, she grabbed my hand and everything came out of me in a rush; how I could have saved Tommy but I didn't, how I had stopped and I still don't know why. How I had lost everything, but that she lost her son, and how I decided that there was no point, nothing, not anything. I had gone to kill myself. I went out to step in front of a train, but it stopped, and I got on and I never came back.

"I was hyperventilating and I froze up. I needed her to say something, and she did. She said, 'Rob, you just disappeared. I called the police. They found your car. You weren't home. Rob, you broke my heart.' Just like that, she said it. I broke her heart."

"Jesus."

"Yeah, Jesus, Red. She said that if I had stayed we could have gotten through it somehow. And she asked why I'd come back, so I told her about the trains and the curse but I don't think she believed it — not then. I told her I'd come back to beg her forgiveness; she told me that she'd forgiven me the same night it happened. And she asked the sixty-four-dollar question."

"'What now?'"

"What now. I said I didn't know, but that if it was any consolation, I had never stopped loving her all these years. It was true, but at that moment it must have sounded pretty pathetic because she started talking

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about how she'd had a daughter, how she had the orchestra and her other activities, and how comfortable she'd become with being alone. And that's when I felt it."

"What?"

"The pain in my chest. I'd been away from the trains almost an entire day finding her and they were calling me back. I hadn't broken the curse. So I sat there, listening to her talk about her self-contained life, and finally she asked if I would come to dinner. Because I knew she was just being nice I had to say no, that I had to get back. I asked her if she would mind driving me back to the Allen Avenue Crossover in Burbank, and she said fine."

I shook my head. It was a hard way to go, and I knew what he must have been feeling. All that time, and he'd come back and blown his best and only chance. Rob sipped his wine silently, remembering. Finally I couldn't take it anymore. "Jesus, Rob. What happened?"

"We drove out to the Allen Avenue Crossover, the same place where I went to the rails twenty eight years ago. As we pulled up and stopped I noticed that Elizabeth was crying. She kept saying that she was sorry but she couldn't."

"Couldn't? Couldn't love you?"

"Couldn't commit. Couldn't change her life to include me. I understood that. I got out of the car and it was starting to rain. She walked to the tracks with me and we held each other and I swear, Red, it actually began to thunder. She kissed me, deep and sweet and total, the best kiss I'd ever had and something in her flipped. Some off-switch clicked to on.

"She started to yell, and then scream and her words began to make sense. She was yelling at the heavens, at the gods, to let me go, to give her man back. Thunder exploded overhead and I was afraid for Elizabeth, that I'd drawn the curse to her. Then it let loose. A bolt of lightning hit the signal bridge and blew it apart and there was a bright flash and the next thing I knew I was on my back, on the ground in the rain. Elizabeth was shaking me and calling my name; I smelled smoke — and it was me."

"It hit you."

"It hit both of us, but we weren't harmed. And the curse was gone. She did it. She gave me the love of a pure woman and broke the curse."

We were staring at each other, breathing hard. The candle had

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guttered out. Rob took a sip of wine and I downed the rest of my water in one long gulp.

"So you're living in L.A. again," I said at last.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm good, and Liz and I are together."

"A fairy tale ending."

"We're working on it," Rob said. "And there's one more thing to take care of." He pushed an envelope across to me. Written on it was John "Red" Corcoran. I opened it.

"A June wedding. Good for you."

"We want you there, Red. I want you to be my best man."

"Really?"

"Really. Will you come?"

"I'd be honored. But, Dutch — your best man? Why me?"

"Of all the people who picked me up on those trains, you were the only one who took the time to help me get back down."

— *For Leni Ramberg*

COMING ATTRACTIONS

THOMAS M. DISCH graces our pages next month with a short and elegant piece from the northern border of the United States, "The Wall of America." (Minnesotans, please note: that's not "The *Mall* of America," but we do expect you to flock to this one when we open the doors.)

Also on the schedule for March is Carol Emshwiller's latest story, "I Live with You," a deceptively simple story of fairly ordinary people facing slightly extraordinary events.

Fans of adventure fiction can look forward to a new tale next month by Charles Coleman Finlay. In "Love and the Wayward Troll," Mr. Finlay returns to the life of the would-be troll named Maggot and regales us with more of his escapades.

Other delights scheduled for the months ahead include Ron Goulart's new account of Harry Challenge's latest predicament, M. Rickert's new story from the dark side, a haunted house or two, and lots more. Surf over to *www.fsfmag.com* to subscribe or use the business reply card in this issue and make sure you won't miss a thing.

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CURIOSITIES

THE THREE PERILS OF MAN: WAR, WOMEN AND WITCHCRAFT, BY JAMES HOGG (1822)

IMAGINE a world inhabited by brownies, kelpies, and bogles, and you've imagined the legendary and mysterious Borders area of Scotland. Throw in a couple of giants, a demon or two, some courtly love, and a very large measure of satire, and you've got James Hogg's epic novel *The Three Perils of Man*. Perhaps best known for his supernatural character study *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Hogg (1770-1835), a native of the Borders, drew much of his inspiration from the ballads and folktales learned at his mother's knee. *The Three Perils* combines elements of romance, fantasy, and the small-group adventure we have come to know well from epics such as *The Lord of the Rings*, but Hogg's novel predated Tolkien's works by well over a hundred years.

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The journey is fraught with peril from the malevolent forces that stalk the group at every turn, requiring epic feats of strength and cunning from the beleaguered band. Science clashes with religion, intellect with superstition, and when the Devil himself finally turns the lot of them into cattle, the key to the retaking of Roxburgh Castle just may be at hand.

—Connie Braton Meek

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